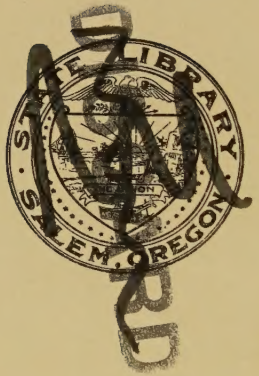
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THE DEVIL

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THE DEVIL

A Religious Comedy
in Three Acts and a Prologue

by

BENN W. LEVY

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TO
DENNIS COHEN

"*To man is permitted the contemplation of the skies, but the practice of virtue is commanded.*"

SAMUEL JOHNSON.

PERSONS OF THE PLAY

(in the order of their first appearance)

D. C. Magnus
Paul Robinson
Dorothy Lister
Cosmo Penny
Louis Kisch
Beatrice Messiter
Rev. Herbert Messiter
Ellen
Rev. Nicholas Lucy

The play was first publicly performed on January 12, 1930, at the Arts Theatre, London, with the following cast :

D. C. MAGNUS	NORMAN MCKINNEL
PAUL ROBINSON	DIANA WYNYARD
DOROTHY LISTER	SYBIL THORNDIKE
COSMO PENNY	ERNEST THESIGER
LOUIS KISCH	MELVILLE COOPER
BEATRICE MESSITER	JEAN CADELL
REV. HERBERT MESSITER	LEWIS CASSON
ELLEN	MOLLY RANKIN
REV. NICHOLAS LUCY	DENNIS NEILSON-TERRY

PROLOGUE

For a moment the stage is in darkness. A door is heard to open, and the light is switched on. D. C. MAGNUS *has come home to his flat. A small room, this sitting-room, but packed tight with good things; especially pictures. A Goya, a Monet, a John are the most conspicuous. One or two fine Tang and Han figures are there also, and a majolica plate and a pretty Victorian sampler: so that we conclude that* MR. MAGNUS' *tastes are a little fashionable as well as catholic and cultured.*

D. C. MAGNUS *himself, a large man in his early fifties, is a fine-looking fellow in an unorthodox way. He is not very well groomed, even now in his dinner-jacket; but he has the double attraction of a quick, bright eye and a powerful, though slow and heavy, kind of physical virility.*

He crosses the room to turn on additional light from a reading-lamp.

MAGNUS (*speaking to someone outside*): Come in.

She comes in. Strongly individual she is, if a little self-consciously so. She carries a black sombrero and wears a stiff heavy black cloth cloak that reaches almost to the ground. Her hair is straight and severe; and she is very beautiful.

THE GIRL: I was looking at that thing in the hall.

MAGNUS: That lithograph?

THE GIRL: Is it a lithograph?

MAGNUS: Yes; good, don't you think?

THE GIRL: I couldn't see properly in that light. Isn't it Cezanne?

MAGNUS: Yes. It was done by a friend of his.

She is looking self-confidently at the treasures about her.

THE GIRL: My hat, you've got some lovely things.

MAGNUS: You must come and see my cottage in the country.

THE GIRL: What a divine clock!

MAGNUS: Nice chap, isn't he? I bought it with my first royalties. Empire's coming into vogue again now. There are no more sheep-like people in the world than collectors. I ought to know. I am one.

THE GIRL: Has it stopped or lost? It says half-past twelve. It was half-past one when we left the Jevinsons.

MAGNUS: Was it really! I got there just after ten, met you at a quarter-past and began talking to you at half-past: so that you can calculate, if your arithmetic is up to it, that we chattered almost solidly for not less than three hours! Good God!

THE GIRL: And apparently we haven't finished yet.

MAGNUS: Have a drink?

THE GIRL: May I have a whisky and soda?

MAGNUS: You may have two.

He pours out one for her and one for himself.

THE GIRL: It's been rather an amazing evening, hasn't it?

MAGNUS: Why?

THE GIRL: Well, do you usually go to a party and spend the entire evening talking, talking, talking to someone you've never met before in your life?

MAGNUS: Sometimes.

THE GIRL: And do attractive young women frequently seek you out and devote their entire evening to you, as I did?

MAGNUS: As frequently as I let 'em.

THE GIRL: I suppose so. People are such snobs.

MAGNUS: You're not a snob, I think. So why did you?

THE GIRL: Seek you out?

MAGNUS: Yes.

THE GIRL: Partly because you're a celebrity, and I like celebrities, especially the less modish ones. I like them not for snobbish reasons, but because on the whole—though not always—they're more interesting than nonentities. Otherwise they'd *be* nonentities.

MAGNUS: The theory's all right. Still, for my quiet tastes, give me nonentities every time.

THE GIRL: That's mere inverted snobbery. In practice are your friends nonentities?

MAGNUS (*amused*): No.

THE GIRL: Very well, then.

MAGNUS: Was fame my only attraction? Don't humiliate me so.

THE GIRL: No. I was interested by what I knew of you.

MAGNUS: Yet you've never read a line I've written?

THE GIRL (*smiling gently*): No. That rankles, does it?

MAGNUS: No. It does an author good to meet an illiterate, say, once a month.

THE GIRL: I'm extremely well read.

MAGNUS: I notice gaps in your reading.

THE GIRL: They shall be filled up. Don't forget, you're going to give me a copy of "The Distant Drum."

MAGNUS: I have it here. Read it, and you will be more interested in me than ever.

THE GIRL: Lawrence once told me that with the possible exception of Norton Douglas, you're the wickedest old scamp in Europe.

MAGNUS: I protest. He does me an injustice. I'll swear I'm wickeder than Douglas.

THE GIRL: You haven't told me yet why you were content to spend three hours with *me*. Was it simply your preference for nonentities?

MAGNUS: Not only that.

THE GIRL: Then what was the attraction?

MAGNUS (*teasing her*): Physical.

THE GIRL: Of course: but only that?

MAGNUS: Othello liked Desdemona because she listened to him patiently while he showed off to her.

THE GIRL: Doesn't my brain or personality interest you at all?

MAGNUS: Very much. But it wouldn't if you were ugly.

THE GIRL (*good-humouredly*): I see. Well, I suppose I should be satisfied with that. (*She turns over the leaves of his book idly while he drinks.*) You're not married, are you?

MAGNUS: No. I was.

THE GIRL: Long ago?

MAGNUS: Twenty years ago. I married, strangely enough, an extremely good woman. She was very good and I was very wicked. So she left me.

THE GIRL: For another man?

MAGNUS: Yes. She was, so to speak, too good to be true. (*She laughs.*) Why?

THE GIRL: I was wondering who Laura Magnus is.

(*She reads from the book.*) "Dedicated to Laura Magnus."

MAGNUS: Laura Magnus is my aunt.

THE GIRL (*teasing him in her turn*): To whom you have always been devoted ever since you wore socks.

MAGNUS: I still wear socks.

THE GIRL: Then you are still devoted.

MAGNUS: I am not, but I am her only living relative.

THE GIRL: How touching!

MAGNUS: And she is eighty-six and an invalid: and she has five thousand a year.

THE GIRL (*laughing*): Yes, you are a wicked old man all right.

MAGNUS: Wicked nothing! Wouldn't *you* write four words for five thousand a year?

THE GIRL: I hate writing, but I almost believe I would. Still, I should laugh if she disappoints you.

MAGNUS: She won't. When I sent her the book, she was so pleased that it very nearly killed her before she had time to alter her will in my favour.

THE GIRL: Has she read it?

MAGNUS: God is good. She can't read. I doubt if she ever could. Aunt Laura is a slender-witted Congregationalist of incredible piety. So is the central figure in my book!

THE GIRL: Poor old lady! You set great store by money?

MAGNUS: I hope I have a proper respect for it.

THE GIRL (*with a glance at the room*): You seem to have enough.

MAGNUS: Not without writing.

THE GIRL: Do you hate writing?

MAGNUS: I like talking better: but it's not so marketable.

THE GIRL: You've written precious little lately and still appear to be quite well-fed.

MAGNUS: The films have been rather a help these last years.

THE GIRL: But surely your books don't make good films?

MAGNUS: They don't: but the people who buy 'em haven't read 'em. Somebody—probably my publisher—tells them that the name of D. C. Magnus is a household word current in every household except theirs, and they come to me with huge cheques in each hand.

THE GIRL: What a pretty picture!

MAGNUS: Last week Heaven sent me a semi-conscious film magnate, to whom I succeeded in selling for an immense sum a book of mine called "The Re-birth of Venus." It was a collection of essays on the æsthetic principles of the Renascence.

THE GIRL: Why can't somebody find a film magnate for me? People shouldn't be selfish over such things. I'd be quite satisfied with even a share in one.

MAGNUS: Have *you* got any money?

THE GIRL: Not a penny.

MAGNUS: How do you live?

She shrugs.

THE GIRL: Like a cat. Odds and ends. Anything that turns up.

MAGNUS: I thought you were some sort of an artist.

THE GIRL: So I am: some sort of a one. As a matter of fact I was rather promising. But I couldn't afford to study.

MAGNUS: And so?

THE GIRL: And so I do what I can.

MAGNUS: Don't you paint at all now?

THE GIRL: Oh yes: a few scraps of commercial work. Occasional book-jackets, now and then a menu-card for the Savoy, and so on. But I'm not too good at it.

MAGNUS: But that doesn't keep you?

THE GIRL: No: I sit occasionally too. (*He raises his eyebrows.*) I don't mind really. I'm rather vain of my figure.

MAGNUS (*with a glance of disapproval at his own*): Enviable state of mind!

THE GIRL: Then I get photographed in other people's furs and pearls for the advertisements. That brings in a bit. Then the Jevinsons are sweet to me. They're always putting odd jobs of work in my way when they can: and when they can't (*she grins*), a good square meal. He even lets me work at his place sometimes. Backwash of the studios, a dear friend once called me. The description's as good as any other.

MAGNUS: What a dismal existence. How old are you?

THE GIRL: Twenty-four.

MAGNUS: Twenty-seven years younger than I. What's going to become of you?

THE GIRL: I make it a rule never to look more than a day ahead.

MAGNUS (*gravely*): The wise virgin!

There is a slight brooding pause.

THE GIRL: Do you think I am?

MAGNUS: What? Wise?

THE GIRL (*also gravely*): No.

MAGNUS (*respectfully echoing her seriousness*): At first I wasn't sure. Now I think you are.

THE GIRL: People often ask me, but they never believe me when I tell them. You're quite right.

MAGNUS: Miraculous!

The girl laughs happily.

THE GIRL: I suppose you think it's foolish of me?

MAGNUS: Very; unless you lack the inclination.

THE GIRL: I wish to Heaven I did.

MAGNUS: Then why?

THE GIRL: Oh, a variety of reasons.

MAGNUS: Moral ones? Religious ones?

THE GIRL: Good heavens, no. I see God as Hardy sees him: an opponent who holds all the trumps in his hand, who loves to tease you and trick you and bait you and make you caper for his inane sardonic amusement.

MAGNUS (*shaking his head*): It's not worth being bitter about.

THE GIRL: I'm not bitter. But if that's what God is, why should I owe him anything? Why should I waste time trying to be good? Well, I don't. I live *my* life, not his. And when every now and again he drops a thunderbolt on me, I just scramble on to my feet again as best I can, snap my fingers and trudge along till the next one drops. I find that thunderbolts are less painful if you treat them like that.

MAGNUS: I know someone with a God pretty much like yours. You shall meet him.

THE GIRL: Who is he?

MAGNUS: He is the Vicar of my parish in the country: the Reverend Herbert Messiter.

THE GIRL (*smiling*): Jolly views for a clergyman!

MAGNUS: You see, unlike you, he *is* bitter. He adores me and hates God. I don't altogether appreciate the inference: but there it is. And his wife is a less exaggerated Aunt Laura.

THE GIRL: Why is he bitter?

MAGNUS: He happens to have been struck by more than the usual number of thunderbolts: one tragedy after another. His first wife died of ptomaine poisoning on their honeymoon; and his second wife didn't. Calamity affected him that way, that's all. First he became an ordinary respectable atheist. Then his atheism gave way to the need for some First Cause that he could actively hate. He went half-mad really and grew to hate God with a kind of maniac sincerity. It was then that he took Holy Orders.

THE GIRL: How horrible! Why?

MAGNUS: He wants to betray God. He thinks he can do it better as a clergyman.

THE GIRL: How does he propose to do it?

MAGNUS: God alone knows! (*He grins.*) That's the irony. (*He drinks.*)

THE GIRL: But don't his parishioners see through him?

MAGNUS: They adore him. He's wonderful to them. And he's a fine preacher and a first-class theologian.

THE GIRL: But his wife?

MAGNUS: She sees the good work he is doing, and is content to let sleeping dogs lie.

THE GIRL: Content?

MAGNUS: Well, perhaps not content. In point of fact, it's worried her grey. But she prays hard for his soul. What else is there to do?

THE GIRL: Nothing, I suppose. Anyway, what does it matter? (*She gets up and wanders about the room.*) What does anything matter?

MAGNUS: And yet, feeling like that, you still have this—unexpected inhibition?

THE GIRL: It's difficult to explain. (*She finds a cigarette and speaks while lighting it.*) Just as some people hoard up their money for their children, so I hoard up my—my purity for the man I shall fall in love with. It sounds rather romantic and high-school when you put it into words. And perhaps it is. (*She shrugs.*)

MAGNUS: "Ah, take the cash and let the credit go!"

THE GIRL: You're probably right. Do *you* do that?

MAGNUS: I do. That's why your sardonic, teasing God doesn't worry me. I don't know what he wants or what he doesn't want, what I *should* do or what I *shouldn't* do, what to expect and what not to expect, but I do know that Goya painted good pictures (*he jerks his head towards one*), that Wren built good buildings, that Mozart made good music, that Cortot can play good music, that, though I may not have heard the heavenly angels sing, the Vatican choir is pretty good to go on with; that there are some very good books in this vale of tears, that there are good brains to wrestle happily with one's own, that friendship is good and laughter is good and women's kisses are good and colour and form and sleep are good and food is good and drink is very good and life, life is good; and, for all I know to the contrary, so is death. In short, God has made me a very good universe. I couldn't have done it better myself.

THE GIRL (*smiling*): The pagan's creed. You forgot " the rough male kiss of blankets."

MAGNUS: I forgot a lot. But there's enough there to construct a barbed-wire palisade against which even *your* teasing, trump-holding God cannot prevail. (*He walks across and takes his book from her lap.*) Tell me, do you regard fifty-one as a very ripe old age?

THE GIRL: No. I don't care very much for young men.

MAGNUS: I think you're the first person to say that to me since—since I *was* a young man! (*He sits at his desk and takes a pen.*) I think you're extremely beautiful.

THE GIRL: So do I.

MAGNUS (*without turning round*): That wasn't an idle compliment.

THE GIRL (*serious again*): I know. I loved your saying it.

He has the fly-leaf of the book open before him.

MAGNUS: Are you easily insulted?

THE GIRL: No.

MAGNUS: I don't mean to insult you.

THE GIRL: Are you going to make what the magistrates call an improper suggestion to me?

MAGNUS: Yes. You seem to have been expecting it?

THE GIRL: Not really. As a matter of fact I didn't know quite *what* to expect. I try everything once.

MAGNUS: I suppose it doesn't often happen after three hours' acquaintance?

THE GIRL (*with good-nature*): It sometimes happens after three minutes!

MAGNUS: If I dispense with the dreary traditional

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preliminaries, I mean it as a compliment to your intelligence.

THE GIRL (*genuinely*): It's a nice compliment. (*He reaches for a second copy of the book from above his head.*) What are you doing with those books?

MAGNUS: I'm going to write an inscription in them.

THE GIRL: In both?

MAGNUS: Yes.

THE GIRL: Why?

MAGNUS: So that you may take your choice. What's the date?

THE GIRL: July 26th.

He writes.

MAGNUS (*stopping suddenly, his eye twinkling*): By the way, what's your name?

She laughs.

THE GIRL: Paul.

MAGNUS (*with gentle scepticism*): Paul?

THE GIRL (*a shade defiantly*): Paul Robinson.

MAGNUS: It's not Paul really.

He grins at her.

THE GIRL (*rising to his level*): Quite right. You know your world all right, don't you, you horrible man?

MAGNUS: What is it really?

THE GIRL: Elsie.

MAGNUS: Bad luck.

THE GIRL: Well, do I look like an Elsie?

MAGNUS (*teasing her again*): Perhaps not so much an Elsie as an Else. So you chose Paul. A nice name.

THE GIRL: I suppose you think that was childish of me?

MAGNUS: Yes; but I'm old enough to like childishness.

THE GIRL: Get on with your inscriptions. (*He does so. When he has finished*) What have you said?

MAGNUS: In the first I have written, "To my friend Paul." In the second I'm afraid I have lapsed into a French cliché. "A ma chére amie Paul."

She smiles slowly.

PAUL: I see the point. And I'm to make my choice.

MAGNUS: Think it over and make your choice when you like.

PAUL (*kindly*): I'm afraid I can choose now. (*She goes across to him and softly taps the first book.*) I'm sorry.

MAGNUS: So am I. Never mind.

PAUL: But it's not because I think you're too old.

MAGNUS: My dear, you needn't excuse yourself!

THE GIRL: Aren't you curious to know why?

MAGNUS: Why, I draw the obvious conclusion.

THE GIRL: Then you're wrong. I do like you enormously: yes, physically as well as mentally. And I love being with you. You're terribly companionable; and somehow—reassuring. And I love talking to you. But. . . . (*She stops at a loss.*)

MAGNUS: But what?

PAUL: Upon my honour, I don't know. I'm probably being a fool and throwing away something good. But there it is. What you call my unexpected inhibition, I suppose. I'd better go. It's nearly two. Can I have my book?

MAGNUS: Yes. (*He hands it to her and then changes his mind.*) No, I'm going to write something else in it first.

He turns to his desk again.

PAUL: A poem?

Unseen by her he takes a cheque-form from a drawer and begins to write.

MAGNUS : The loveliest in the world. (*She puts on her cloak and picks up her hat.*) You must promise not to read it till you get home.

PAUL : I promise.

He blots the cheque, folds it in the fly-leaf and hands her the book.

MAGNUS (*after regarding her for a moment in friendly silence*) : Don't you ever put your hat *on* ?

PAUL : Yes ; but not this one, if I can possibly help it. It's a bit too big in the crown !

MAGNUS : It's a fine gallant affair.

PAUL : I suppose you think that's another childishness ?

MAGNUS : Well, there is something about a black sombrero that seems rather to—er—go to an artist's head.

PAUL (*offering her hand*) : Good-night. (*The movement means putting book and hat into the same hand. The book falls. She picks it up ; but the cheque is disclosed. She reads it slowly.*) That's a very large cheque.

MAGNUS : It's larger than I can afford.

PAUL : Have I by any chance got hold of the wrong book ?

MAGNUS : I don't think so. Make sure.

She reads.

PAUL : " To my friend Paul."

MAGNUS : The right book.

PAUL : Have we misunderstood each other ?

MAGNUS : I don't think so.

PAUL : Then what's this for ?

MAGNUS : For my friend Paul.

PAUL : For nothing at all ?

MAGNUS : For over three delightful hours. This is precisely the kind of sentimental fatuity that you should expect from a man of fifty-one. Good night.

He offers his hand.

PAUL (*taking it a little absent-mindedly*) : Good night. (*She goes slowly towards the door. And there she stops. Then making up her mind, she comes back deliberately, drops her cloak again and hands him the book.*) Please may I have the other copy ?

MAGNUS : You've changed your mind ?

PAUL : Yes.

MAGNUS : What made you ?

PAUL : Your darling cheque. It nearly made me cry.

He gives her a long, slow, wicked, friendly wink.

MAGNUS : It was meant to !

The impudence of it nearly takes her breath away, but she manages, as a point of honour, to recover, and laughs back at him with a good humour and camaraderie equal to his own.

ACT I

Scene I

A September evening between seven and eight o'clock about two months later. This is probably the largest room in Magnus' *cottage—an old farmhouse with modern conveniences, as the estate agents would say. There is a door on the right and another on the left that leads into the dining-room. At the back is a long, low window looking on to the garden and a third door divided horizontally in the manner of stable doors. At present the top half of it is open. We gather from the disposition of furniture that the fire-place is at the very front of the stage, in the fourth, invisible wall. There is no fire. This room is also well stocked with covetable possessions. Among them one notices a caricature of the owner by Max. Deep in an armchair* D. C. Magnus, *clad in an old camel-hair dressing-gown, lies asleep. Presently from the door opposite the dining-room* Paul *comes in. She carries a letter in her hand, and is dressed for dinner in a long-sleeved, long-skirted, long-bodiced, tight-fitting black velvet dress, high-necked at the back, but cut low and square in front.*

Paul (*when she sees him*): Darling!

He does not wake, so she taps him on the nose with the letter.

Magnus: Hullo.

Paul: You'll be late for dinner, my dear. What are you doing down here?

Magnus: Waiting for the bath. Dorothy's in it.

PAUL: That was an hour ago.

MAGNUS (*sleepily*): Then she's probably just coming out.

PAUL: She's nearly dressed. It's half-past seven.

MAGNUS (*seeing the letter*): Who's that for?

PAUL: You.

She gives it to him, but he doesn't open it.

MAGNUS: What do you think of Dorothy? And her husband?

PAUL: Louis is a darling. But I've known him for ages.

MAGNUS: And Dorothy?

PAUL: Well, her I've known less than an hour. She seems nice. I've never even seen her act. You'd better not tell her.

MAGNUS: She's a good actress. *I* think she's among the best. If she gets hold of a really first-rate part, we shall see something.

PAUL: But she can play almost any part she wants, can't she?

MAGNUS: Well, she's not in management. What about Cosmo? Do you like him?

PAUL: Very much. He's amusing. I must read some of his stuff.

MAGNUS: You won't find that amusing.

PAUL: I thought you said it was so good?

MAGNUS: So it is. But not exactly amusing. He writes just exactly what you wouldn't expect him to. You'd expect something rather precious?

PAUL: Yes, and flippant. Isn't it?

MAGNUS: No, it's extremely solid and unaffected, almost stolid: very painstaking and sincere. More like Conrad than anyone else.

PAUL: You certainly wouldn't think that.

MAGNUS: He never gets a review that doesn't mention Conrad.

PAUL: He's quite successful, isn't he?

MAGNUS: Not really; only with the Inner Circle. Metroland knows him not. He'd write better still if they did. His work lacks self-confidence; so he's in a kind of vicious circle. He's not successful because he lacks self-confidence, and he lacks self-confidence because he's not successful. (*He has been opening his letter and now he reads it. Suddenly he gives a short laugh.*) Paul, Aunt Laura's dead.

PAUL: No; how lovely!

MAGNUS: There's nothing lovely about it.

PAUL: Don't be a hypocrite.

MAGNUS: Do you remember saying that you'd laugh if she disappointed me?

PAUL: Yes.

MAGNUS: Then have a good laugh now.

PAUL (*after an incredulous pause*): No!

MAGNUS: Very well, you wait till the will is published.

PAUL: But it can't even have been proved yet. She's only just died. How do you know?

MAGNUS: She told me so herself: nearly three weeks ago.

He is enjoying himself thoroughly.

PAUL: Told you so! But why?

MAGNUS: Because of you.

PAUL: What do you mean?

MAGNUS: What I say. Aunt Laura was old-fashioned: she disapproved of sin.

PAUL : Is all this really true ?

MAGNUS : Perfectly.

PAUL : Then why didn't you tell me ? I should have left you ?

MAGNUS : That's *why* I didn't tell you.

PAUL : But how did she know ?

MAGNUS : I suppose somebody told her.

PAUL : Who ?

MAGNUS : I don't know. Does it matter ?

PAUL : It was Mrs. Messiter. I know she thinks we're living together.

MAGNUS : Does she ? What a nasty-minded old lady !

PAUL : She can't stand me.

MAGNUS : She always seems very polite to you.

PAUL : Only because the Bible tells her to be polite to sinners.

MAGNUS : Anyway it wasn't Mrs. Messiter. She doesn't know my aunt. To think that an obscure Nonconformist charity should benefit to the tune of nearly one hundred thousand pounds from your immorality !

PAUL : But, darling, what are you going to do ?

MAGNUS : Why, nothing. I haven't the chance now. Don't be so solemn about it.

PAUL : Had you the chance three weeks ago ?

MAGNUS : Oh yes, the old lady was fair. She suggested forcibly that I should give you up. She asked me whether I wouldn't rather become her sole legatee than remain a forsaken profligate. I thought it over very carefully, and finally decided that I would rather remain a forsaken profligate.

She turns her e[illegible]way, for she is touched.

PAUL: Oh, D. C., you are a dear.

MAGNUS: Nothing of the kind. I wasn't thinking of you. I simply asked myself quite selfishly which I wanted most, you or five thousand a year.

PAUL (*almost shyly*): Wasn't there a—a third alternative?

MAGNUS: You mean I might have married you? (*She nods.*) I thought of that. To have suggested marriage when a legacy was at stake, but not before, struck me as rather a poor compliment to you.

PAUL: You're a very nice man.

MAGNUS: You mustn't say things like that; you'll destroy my reputation. By the way, *will* you marry me? Five thousand a year no longer stands between us.

PAUL (*when she recovers power of speech*): Do you want me to?

MAGNUS: Very much, if *you* want to.

PAUL: You once said a married man was like a kite with a tail of lead.

MAGNUS: Did I ever make as bad an epigram as that?

PAUL: You meant it for more than a mere epigram. (*There is a silence while she looks about her strangely.*) When a girl's not married, marriage sometimes seems like a haven of rest and safety. I wonder what the haven seems like when you're in it.

MAGNUS: Well, are you inclined to try?

Coming at length to a decision, she shakes her head.

PAUL: No, darling.

MAGNUS: Thank God!

PAUL: You took a risk.

MAGNUS: A very small risk. I trusted your intelligence.

PAUL: Still, you'd have had to go through with it.

MAGNUS: Worse things have happened to me than that.

PAUL: Why did you ask me?

MAGNUS: Politeness.

PAUL: I'm sorry, but you *are* a nice man.

MAGNUS: I tell you quite sincerely I'm nothing of the kind. I serve no one's interest but my own. The moment I cease to derive a childish pleasure from paying you that kind of compliment, I shall immediately discontinue the practice.

She smiles.

PAUL: It's chilly to-night. Shall we have a fire after dinner?

MAGNUS: Yes. Tell Ellen. I must go and dress.

As he moves off, DOROTHY LISTER *and* COSMO PENNY *come in. She is an attractive woman of a not easily guessable age, though probably in her early thirties.* COSMO, *who is rather less than that, is clearly a man who spends some pains and imagination on his appearance.*

DOROTHY: D. C., you'll be late.

MAGNUS: Late perhaps, but not last. Your husband will see to that.

DOROTHY: Louis' not changing.

MAGNUS: He'll still be last.

LOUIS KISCH *comes in.*

LOUIS: Who'll be last?

His voice is slightly guttural.

MAGNUS: I will be.

He goes. KISCH *is an ugly little chap, with coarse, unruly hair, and a face either morose or beaming.*

DOROTHY : I think it's cold.

COSMO : What about cocktails ?

PAUL : I'll go and make them.

COSMO : Can you ?

PAUL : One shake is pretty much like another.

She goes into the dining-room.

DOROTHY : Do you think D. C.'s living with that girl ?

COSMO : I hadn't heard that anybody is.

DOROTHY : Obviously somebody is.

COSMO : Then perhaps Louis is.

LOUIS : No, I don't think so.

DOROTHY : Well, make up your mind, dear.

COSMO : Then it's D. C.

LOUIS : It's nobody.

DOROTHY : She's been staying here for two months to my knowledge.

LOUIS : But always there have been other visitors in the house.

DOROTHY : You may be right. Post-war morals are very strange. As far as I can gather, people nowadays frequently go away together for a week-end and then forget why.

LOUIS : I've known Paul pretty well, and I'm fairly sure she's straight. Jevinson swears she is. He can't understand it.

DOROTHY : Mrs. Messiter is obviously less convinced.

LOUIS *shrugs.*

LOUIS : What do you expect from Mrs. Messiter ?

COSMO : If ever a woman brought out the worst in me, it's Mrs. Messiter. Censorious——

LOUIS : Smug——

COSMO : Self-righteous——

LOUIS : Pharisaical——

COSMO : Dutiful——

LOUIS : And plain.

COSMO : No wonder her husband goes in for black magic or whatever it is. Reaction. I myself, I know, am inclined to be tiresome and precious at the best of times, but with Mrs. Messiter I become positively orchidaceous.

LOUIS : She's a horrible woman.

COSMO : I thought you'd never met her ?

LOUIS : Nor I have.

DOROTHY : I think I mentioned her to him once. Louis, even if you're too lazy to change, you might brush your hair. Here, dear.

With an inadequate comb from her bag she does what she can for him, while morosely he submits. PAUL *comes back with a little tray of cocktails.*

PAUL : I thought I heard the Messiters. Haven't they come ?

COSMO : At present there is only a foreboding of evil.

DOROTHY : Thank you.

PAUL : Louis, I love your new picture.

LOUIS : What new picture ?

PAUL : That D. C. has just bought.

LOUIS : Oh, that's not new. D. C. picked it out in my studio.

PAUL : I think it's marvellous.

LOUIS : It's not a bad one.

COSMO : To my mind D. C.'s got most of your best work. He's got about a dozen.

LOUIS : Only five beside this one.

COSMO : God, he must be rich.

LOUIS : Alas, I'm not as expensive as my reputation !

DOROTHY : Very few artists are. Ah, Mrs. Messiter, how nice to see you again.

For just now the MESSITERS *come in. She is a prim, dowdy, middle-aged little woman ; and he a strange, maladroit man—perhaps slightly her junior—with an unconciliatory, fanatical eye.*

MRS. MESSITER : How do you do—how do you do—how do you do—how do you do ? (*And she shakes hands with each of them.*)

COSMO (*who came last*) : Very well, thank you ; one and all.

DOROTHY : I'm not at all well. I had a temperature yesterday and, to come down here to-day, I had positively to drag myself out of an invalid's bed.

COSMO : Did you, darling ? Whose ?

DOROTHY : I forget.

MRS. MESSITER (*patiently*) : Mr. Penny, I am a clergyman's wife.

COSMO (*sympathetically*) : I'm sorry, Mrs. Messiter. (*A pause.*) Still, it's no good worrying.

MRS. MESSITER : I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about ; but I *never* worry. We weren't meant to.

MESSITER : Where's D. C. ?

PAUL : He isn't down yet. I don't think he'll be long. You don't drink cocktails, Mrs. Messiter ?

MRS. MESSITER (*with the parody of a smile*) : I'm afraid I don't.

COSMO : I didn't know you'd met Mr. Kisch before, Mrs. Messiter.

MRS. MESSITER : I hadn't, but Mr. Magnus wasn't

here, and—well, we have a *little* social tact, you know, even in the country.

She smiles benignly.

COSMO: Mr. Kisch is Miss Dorothy Lister's husband.

MRS. MESSITER: Miss Lister's husband? (*She is momentarily puzzled.*) Oh, I understand. You stage people! (*She is almost playful.*) I know, I know! It must be very interesting for you, Mr. Kisch, having such a noted wife.

LOUIS: Nothing could be more interesting, I assure you, Mrs. Messiter.

PAUL: We were just talking about D. C.'s new picture. Are you fond of pictures, Mrs. Messiter?

MRS. MESSITER (*mildly reproving*): Well, I ought to be. You see I paint a little myself: only copies, of course.

COSMO: Do you work in oils?

MRS. MESSITER: Oh no, only water-colour. You see, I find they're not so messy. Mind you, I don't do much now. Naturally, being a clergyman's wife, I have more important things to attend to. But Art's always been a—well, hobby of mine.

DOROTHY: My husband paints a little too, you know.

MRS. MESSITER: Oh, really? How interesting! We must have some long yarns sometime.

LOUIS: Clearly we must. There's no getting away from it.

COSMO: This is one of Louis' pictures.

He lifts a picture from a half-hidden chair.

PAUL: Have *you* seen it, Mr. Messiter?

MESSITER: No. It looks to me very clever. But I don't much understand these things.

COSMO: And what's *your* verdict, Mrs. Messiter?

MRS. MESSITER: Oh, I'm sure it's very clever. (*Giggling a little.*) But—well, I really don't like to say. You see I don't know Mr. Kisch very well.

LOUIS: Pray don't spare me. I hope I'm not oversensitive.

MRS. MESSITER: Well, that lady in the centre—well, woman, I should say—her left arm—(*still giggling*). Are you *quite* sure you don't mind my saying?

LOUIS: Quite sure.

MRS. MESSITER: Well, her left arm is nearly half a foot longer than her right!

So how can she help giggling?

LOUIS: It's true. But there! Everyone has his preferences, and mine happens to be for women whose left arm is longer than their right.

MRS. MESSITER: Oh, I know I shouldn't have mentioned it. But then again that woman in front. (*More tittering.*) Are you really *quite* sure you don't mind?

LOUIS: I could swear it.

MRS. MESSITER: Well, if I *must* say. You know she's knock-kneed!

LOUIS: Alas, she was born knock-kneed. And what God has joined together who am I to put asunder?

MRS. MESSITER: And then her—well, I oughtn't to say, really.

Magnus comes in.

MAGNUS: Hallo, Messiter.

MESSITER: Good evening, D. C.

MAGNUS: I'm sorry to be late, Mrs. Messiter.

He shakes her hand.

MRS. MESSITER: Don't mention it. I think we were a little early. Besides, Mr. Lucy isn't here yet.

MAGNUS : Oh no, I forgot. The famous new curate.

MRS. MESSITER : We were going to bring him with us, but he said he might have to be a minute or two late.

MESSITER (*smiling unamiably*) : He was finishing his sermon for to-morrow.

PAUL : D. C. has been exciting my curiosity about him.

MESSITER : How ?

PAUL : Mainly by telling me nothing.

MESSITER : What a shame ! And there is so much, too, to tell !

MAGNUS : So you continually say.

DOROTHY : But what can be so mysterious about a new curate ?

MESSITER : Nothing, I assure you, Miss Lister. I merely happened to mention to D. C. that when Mr. Lucy climbed the pulpit to preach his first sermon a number of the congregation immediately rose and left the church.

MAGNUS : But you also refused to mention why.

DOROTHY : Was he drunk ?

MESSITER : He was sober.

MRS. MESSITER : He's quite a nice young man really. Herbert, I don't think you should give the impression that he isn't.

MESSITER : I, my dear ? Why, he's my very pride, the present joy of my life. I revel in him.

MAGNUS : That is precisely why I expect something eccentric.

DOROTHY : Let's guess. I say he's a chronic drunkard.

PAUL : I say he's a kind of " private secretary," complete with bath-bun and glass of milk.

COSMO : I say he's an escaped convict with pale blue ears. Louis ?

LOUIS : I say——

But the door opens and ELLEN, *a maidservant, comes in.*

ELLEN : The Reverend Nicholas Lucy.

There is a pause, while MESSITER, *almost leering, watches greedily for the effect that his new curate is about to make upon the company. Some of them catch a sight of him before his entrance and these are vaguely, faintly startled. But before we see the gentleman himself the Curtain falls.*

SCENE II

After dinner the fire is alight, and MRS. MESSITER, DOROTHY *and* PAUL *sit before it. There is an interminable silence.* DOROTHY *yawns.*

MRS. MESSITER: Do you find fires make you sleepy?

DOROTHY (*ambiguously*): Sometimes.

MRS. MESSITER: Of course a fire's very nice, but it does seem a little extravagant in September, don't you think? I mean, when you think of all the poor people.

PAUL: But it was so cold to-night.

MRS. MESSITER: Oh, it was, I know. But, you see, when you think of all the poor people.

DOROTHY: Before dinner I did think of them; all of them. And it made me no warmer.

MRS. MESSITER: I should hate to think your heart's not in the right place, Miss Lister.

DOROTHY: I should hate my doctor to think so.

There is another heavy pause. Presently from the dining-room is heard the sound of mild laughter. DOROTHY *casts a longing glance in that direction.*

MRS. MESSITER (*making another effort*): Mind you, I quite realize that our English summers are not what they were. Mrs. Hornblow was saying that to me only this afternoon. Mrs. Hornblow is the organist's wife, you know.

DOROTHY: I didn't know. How amusing of her!

PAUL: She *is* amusing, isn't she, Mrs. Messiter? She even has an amusing dog, a strange little creature that only opens his mouth when you uncurl his tail.

DOROTHY: What an ingenious arrangement!

MRS. MESSITER: But really, you know, that dog can do everything but speak.

PAUL: It certainly can eat. Mrs. Hornblow feeds it better than her own children.

MRS. MESSITER: I'm afraid she does. It's very wrong.

DOROTHY: So it is. (*After another pause; longingly*) Those men are a long time.

MRS. MESSITER: I expect they are just having a little chat.

DOROTHY: You think that's what it is? (*A pause.*) I am not sure that I like your Mr. Lucy, Mrs. Messiter.

MRS. MESSITER: Oh, there's no harm in him really.

PAUL: I thought dinner was dreadful. Let's pray D. C. doesn't ask him again.

MRS. MESSITER: I really don't see that he did any harm to you.

PAUL: He didn't. He just oppressed me. I don't know why. (*turning to* DOROTHY) Did you feel it?

DOROTHY *nods.*

MRS. MESSITER: But really he did nothing.

DOROTHY: That's just the point. I don't believe the whole of dinner he opened his mouth once.

MRS. MESSITER: Of course I must admit he's a little, well, original. But (*pointedly at the others*) we all have our little quaintnesses, haven't we?

Another silence ; this time longer than ever. Again laughter is heard from the dining-room, but now it is followed by the gentlemen themselves.

DOROTHY : Cosmo, I'm going to start a crusade to put an end to this barbaric, Oriental custom of separating the males from the females after dinner.

COSMO : Quite right, dear. After all why, particularly, after dinner ?

MAGNUS : Bring a chair up, Lucy. Messiter, have this one.

He indicates an easy-chair.

MESSITER : No, thank you. I like something harder.

He brings one into the circle. They are all seated comfortably by now. PAUL *is on a cushion by* MAGNUS' *knee and* MR. LUCY *elegantly erect on a stiff, high-backed chair that he has set midway between the other six. He is a man of about thirty with clerical clothes exquisitely cut to encase his exquisite figure. His hands are beautiful : his features are lean, delicate, pallid and aquiline. But apart from the fact that the assurance and poise of his bearing are almost breathlessly fascinating to behold there is no very easily definable reason why he should have made the faintly discomforting impression that he did.*

MAGNUS : Cosmo tells me you have been ill, Dorothy. I didn't know.

DOROTHY : The Press was disgracefully negligent.

MAGNUS : What was the matter ?

DOROTHY : A bad fit of temper ; pure insensate rage.

MAGNUS : Quarrelled with Louis ?

DOROTHY : Certainly not. It takes three to make a quarrel.

COSMO : I shall always be happy to oblige, darling.

MRS. MESSITER : Oh, really !

COSMO : I beg your pardon, Mrs. Messiter ?

MRS. MESSITER : Oh, nothing. I suppose I'm old-fashioned, you see. It was just your calling Miss Lister—well, darling.

COSMO : I think you don't understand me, Mrs. Messiter. I am a decadent. How can I explain ? Have you ever looked upon mildew, Mrs. Messiter, and found that it was good ?

MRS. MESSITER : Well, no. I can't exactly say that I have.

COSMO (*throwing his arms wide*) : Then look now ! I am vicious, Mrs. Messiter ; beautifully, exquisitely vicious.

MRS. MESSITER : Oh, no, I'm sure not. There's a little good in all of us, you know.

COSMO : Not in me, Mrs. Messiter, not in me. One day, when we have time, I will tell you all about my strange and lovely vices. Our spines shall shiver in unison with delicious horror. Only last week, Dorothy —I meant to tell you about it—I devised a new one, a brand-new vice. (*impressively*) It has to do with scented bootlaces.

DOROTHY : Wonderful !

COSMO : I'm a modest man, Mrs. Messiter, but I think I may boast without undue arrogance that I am on the whole pretty disgusting.

MRS. MESSITER : Of course I'm only a clergyman's wife, so I suppose it's quite fair to make fun of me.

There is an awkward second or two. MAGNUS *leans forward in his chair.*

COSMO (*sobered*) : I'm sorry you should think I've

been doing that. If you do, I most willingly apologize, though nothing was farther from my intention.

MAGNUS : I really think Cosmo was making fun of all of us, if, indeed, at all.

COSMO : That *is* so, but I repeat : I'm sorry.

MRS. MESSITER : Granted.

MAGNUS (*returning to* DOROTHY) : And all this arose out of Dorothy's illness.

DOROTHY : Dorothy's rage.

PAUL : You haven't told us what about.

DOROTHY : If I start thinking about it I shall probably have to go to bed again for three days.

MAGNUS : Risk it.

DOROTHY : Granville-Barker's at last going to do another production.

COSMO : That's nothing to lose your temper about.

DOROTHY : He's going to do *Macbeth* at the Albert Hall. It will be the most sensational thing that's ever happened ; and he wanted me for Lady Macbeth. God, when I think of it ! All my life I've wanted to play that part. And to have done it with Barker ! Oh !

She literally growls with rage.

PAUL : But can't you ?

DOROTHY : My dear, I've got to play in this damned play, *Priscilla or Charybdis*. The first night's in ten days' time, and we'll be lucky if we run a fortnight.

COSMO : Is it good ?

DOROTHY : It's awful.

MAGNUS : Hasn't it a chance ?

DOROTHY : Oh, it may just have. It was written as a philosophical comedy, but, fortunately for the author, it's being produced as a Palais Royal farce.

PAUL: But can't you chuck it?

DOROTHY: My dear, the poor young man wrote the part especially for me. And it will probably cost him all his savings as it is.

COSMO: Dorothy, you shock me. How hideously sentimental! Surely you wouldn't let that influence you?

DOROTHY: Certainly not. What do you take me for? I may be a liar, a thief and an adulteress, mayn't I, Louis?

LOUIS: Of course you may, my dear.

DOROTHY: But at least I'm an artist. I'd get out of this play to-morrow if I could. But I can't. I'm tied up hand and foot by my contract.

MESSITER: What I like about D. C.'s parties is the absence of hypocrisy. All his friends are unprincipled on principle. That's so comfortable.

MRS. MESSITER: Oh, Herbert, how rude!

MESSITER (*ignoring her*): A circle of distinguished blackguards.

MAGNUS: Not blackguards, Messiter: the modern term is realists.

PAUL: Must a man be either a blackguard or a hypocrite?

MESSITER: I am proud to have evolved a third alternative. He may be both.

MRS. MESSITER: Oh, Herbert! People won't know you are joking.

MESSITER: I believe these people will know I'm not. They are not my parishioners.

For the first time MR. LUCY *speaks. His voice is rich, deliberate, courteous.*

NICHOLAS: Let us play Truths.

PAUL : If we do I shall leave the room. A hateful game.

MRS. MESSITER : Is this some new game ?

DOROTHY : So new, Mrs. Messiter, that since the world began it has never really been played properly yet. And I love it.

COSMO : So do I. The most enchanting form of exhibitionism ever invented.

MESSITER : How is it played ?

MAGNUS : It's not an easy game.

MRS. MESSITER : But somebody must explain.

NICHOLAS : It merely consists, Mrs. Messiter, in telling the truth.

MRS. MESSITER : Well, really, you know, that doesn't sound very difficult.

NICHOLAS : It will surprise you.

LOUIS : For example, Mrs. Messiter. If you had to go away to-morrow and spend a fortnight's honeymoon with one of the men present, not including your husband, which of us would you choose ?

MRS. MESSITER : Well, really, Mr. Kisch ; you see, that's so personal.

DOROTHY : Oh, no ; not in the least.

MRS. MESSITER : Oh, I think it is, really.

MAGNUS : But personal questions are permissible.

COSMO : And you haven't answered, Mrs. Messiter. Which of us now ?

MRS. MESSITER : Well, you see, I haven't got to go away with one of you.

PAUL : But supposing you had.

MRS. MESSITER : But, you see, I never *would* have to.

PAUL : But just suppose.

MRS. MESSITER : Well, one can't really suppose a thing like that.

MESSITER (*drily*) : Beatrice is trying to say that it's a very difficult question.

MRS. MESSITER : Supposing I ask Miss Robinson that question.

PAUL (*amiably*) : Then I should refuse to answer it.

NICHOLAS : Let us try.

PAUL : If it is clearly understood that I shall answer no awkward questions.

COSMO : No, I protest. There are a number of awkward, intimate and extremely impertinent questions that I particularly want to ask you.

PAUL : You'll be disappointed ; the truth is much less romantic than your imagination.

COSMO : But I adore the sordid.

DOROTHY : Cosmo !

NICHOLAS : We will play it in a specialized form. Listen.

PAUL : Very well ; but firelight only.

DOROTHY : Yes ; Cosmo, the lights.

> COSMO *turns out all lights save for a reading-lamp. The room is full of smoke by now, for everyone except* MRS. MESSITER *and* NICHOLAS *is smoking;* MAGNUS, MESSITER *and* KISCH *pipes, the other three cigarettes. Their faces are lit up with an orange topsy-turvy chiaroscura from the fire.*

NICHOLAS : We will all answer one question, the same question, in turn. A nice, comprehensive question.

DOROTHY : My teeth are chattering already.

NICHOLAS : Let us go from left to right. Mr.

Kisch, we will begin with you. The truth, the dead truth, the whole truth, so help us all God. It is agreed?

MESSITER: Agreed.

DOROTHY: Agreed.

THE REST (*more or less simultaneously*): Agreed.

NICHOLAS: Mr. Kisch, what do you want?

LOUIS: Is that the question?

NICHOLAS: Yes. What do you want?

LOUIS: Why, the earth and the moon and the stars.

NICHOLAS: All equally?

LOUIS: Oh, no.

MAGNUS: I think you should amplify the question.

NICHOLAS: I think I should. What above all else is your innermost heart's desire? Or, by implication, what do you believe? If you had to sacrifice all your aspirations, which one would you sacrifice last?

LOUIS *puffs for a moment at his pipe.*

LOUIS: I can answer that. I want in the long run only one thing. I want to paint beautiful pictures; and then—more beautiful pictures.

MRS. MESSITER (*with a quite involuntary giggle*): Oh, but really!

LOUIS (*good-humouredly*): Mrs. Messiter clearly thinks I could achieve the moon and stars more easily.

MRS. MESSITER: Oh no: but really—well, you see, of course I've only seen *one* of your pictures.

MAGNUS: Never mind, Mrs. Messiter. Stick to your guns.

DOROTHY: Louis' was a true answer. I can vouch for that.

MAGNUS: Very well: then go you now and do likewise.

DOROTHY (*sobered*): My want is the most blatantly

inglorious in the world. But I shall tell the truth. I want to hear music, a special kind of music.

Looking away from them into the fire, she claps her hands.

MAGNUS: We all want to hear that, my dear.

DOROTHY: Nice D. C. No, I want it more than that. I always have, for as long as I can remember. The greatest thrill of my life was the first time I heard a stranger in the street whisper "Look, that's Dorothy Lister." And it thrills me almost as much now. To be talked about, read about, written about, listened to, looked at, to be important, noticed, applauded: there's my poor, miserable little heaven. Not very noble, but there you are. It's a kind of incurable disease. That's why I've been literally sick and ill, physically ill like an angry child, about missing *Macbeth*.

She falls silent and no one speaks.

NICHOLAS: The thought has just flitted across my mind that I perhaps might be able to help you.

DOROTHY: You? How?

NICHOLAS: Have you your contract with you?

DOROTHY: No, it's at home.

NICHOLAS: Before taking Holy Orders I happened to read for the Bar. It is just possible that your contract may not be water-tight. Would you care to send it to me?

DOROTHY: Why, of course, if it's not too much trouble for you.

NICHOLAS: I should like it.

DOROTHY: That's very kind of you.

NICHOLAS: Good. Whose turn is it?

MAGNUS: Cosmo's. Take the oath, Cosmo. What do you want?

COSMO (*all his flippancy departed*) : I want clapping hands too : though not for the same reason as Dorothy. I don't want it for its own sake. I want it because I think the position of the Unsuccessful Author is a humiliating one. One is liable to become either what is known as a "disappointed man," a literary hanger-on, or a Micawber. The character of each strikes me as undignified to the point of nightmare. I want success mainly to rid me of my own doubts—doubts about my competence, I mean. My perpetual bogey is that my work is merely tripe, if I only knew it, and that the praises of my friends are merely charity, if I could only see through them. I believe if ever I were completely and permanently convinced that for all these years I have been taking myself with such ludicrous seriousness, but would really have been more suitably, less laughably employed as a respectable insurance broker, I believe then that—from genuine shame, not for effectiveness—I should commit suicide. I quite realize that success is not a final criterion, but it's the most concrete and tangible one we have. That's why I want it. That's the bogey I want to get rid of.

MAGNUS : You'll get rid of it all right, my friend. I wish all writers had as little need as you to be afraid. As soon as one book comes off, all the earlier ones will be hailed as masterpieces. Rightly *or* wrongly !

DOROTHY : Hear, hear.

LOUIS : Well, Mrs. Messiter, what do you want ?

MRS. MESSITER : I want what I confess I thought we should all have chosen. I just want to do my duty.

LOUIS : Now I never thought of that.

MRS. MESSITER : You see *I'm* not clever.

LOUIS : Er—quite. Whose turn is it ?

PAUL: Mine.

COSMO (*rubbing his hands*): Ah!

PAUL (*her eyes never moving from the fire*): I shall probably make you all even more uncomfortable than Cosmo Penny did. But that's the object of the game, isn't it? I—I want love. Just like the kitchenmaid; her choice also probably.

MAGNUS: And Dante's.

LOUIS: That shouldn't be difficult.

PAUL: But I want the kind the kitchenmaid wants. That is to say the kind that probably doesn't exist.

MAGNUS: The kind that Dante wanted.

PAUL (*still gazing into the fire*): D. C., you're an angel from Heaven.

DOROTHY: But you must have had it? You're grown-up and beautiful.

PAUL: Oh, I've had it in a way often enough: but never without a fly or several flies in the ointment. I have even had it once in a far—well, sweeter fashion than I deserve. (*She is sitting by* MAGNUS' *feet, and at this point, unseen by the others, presses one of them affectionately with her hand.*) But I want to lose myself completely and recklessly in some unfortunate man, and him to lose himself completely and recklessly in me. I want everything else and everyone else to become mere shadows. And I even want it to be wise and right for us to be like that, instead of foolish. I want no prosaic buts. I don't want reality to come poking its nose in in odd ways to jeer at us. I want circumstances to mould themselves easily to our love, and not our love to be modified and strait-jacketed by circumstances. In other words, I want the moon and the stars. I've finished. D. C., it's your turn.

MAGNUS: Mine? Well, I don't want to produce beauty, I don't want applause, I don't want recognition, I don't want idyllic love, and I certainly don't want to do my duty: though I quite appreciate the value of all these things. There happens to be something I want still more. I want to be comfortable.

DOROTHY: D. C., you're shirking. Play fair. The truth.

MAGNUS: On my honour. Heaven and earth may rot—they probably will. But provided that I don't, it won't worry me. In other words, I want to be comfortable. I, me, myself. I'm a professonal egotist. If you, Dorothy dear, fell downstairs to-morrow and broke your neck, I shouldn't mind in the slightest——

DOROTHY: Oh, D. C.!

MAGNUS (*ignoring her*): Except in so far as it would deprive me personally of the pleasure of your company. For your sake or for Louis' I shouldn't care a rap. For my own I should. Selfishness seems to me the one thing insisted upon by common sense. I repeat I want to be comfortable. I am an ignorant savage: every man is. And though I don't know what is before or behind or above or below or beside me, I do know that I have my senses. And I want them, therefore, to be utilized and satisfied to the greatest possible degree. I ask no more than to be a pig in clover. I repeat I want to be comfortable.

DOROTHY: Yes, I believe he does.

LOUIS: D. C.'s unrhetorical way of saying he wants happiness.

NICHOLAS: There remains Mr. Messiter.

MRS. MESSITER (*nervously*): No, Herbert, don't answer.

MESSITER: And why?

MRS. MESSITER: It's a silly game: it's not a nice game for a minister.

MESSITER: May he *never* tell the truth?

MRS. MESSITER: You—you may get excited.

MESSITER (*with irony*): Possibly. I will try, however, not to be violent. Ladies and gentlemen, I want—I want the living of St. Anthony's at Greenlake. Its incumbent encumbers it no more. Last week he had a stroke.

DOROTHY: But, my dear, why there of all places? Greenlake is such a dismal town. I played there once on tour.

MESSITER: Yet it still remains an important living. It's incumbents never stay there long.

COSMO: They have strokes.

MESSITER: Or receive preferment. It is become a recognized stepping-stone. Four archdeacons have been appointed from there in the last nine years.

PAUL: But that's a particular want. Surely you ought to generalize.

MESSITER: In that case I want my ambition satisfied; my gigantic ambition.

MRS. MESSITER (*apprehensive*): Now, Herbert, please.

MESSITER: I want to rise in the Church, to rise and rise. I want to be one of its leading dignitaries, perhaps even its chief dignitary. Suppose, only suppose, that from that high pinnacle I could—expose God. (*He is carried away and speaking as if to himself.*) What a glorious, cracking, crashing exposure! The archbishop himself laughs and declares God to be the mad, malignant bully that he is. Wouldn't that set God's institutions tottering?

MRS. MESSITER (*distressed*): Herbert, it's not right to speak like that even in fun.

DOROTHY: Suppose your parishioners heard you?

MESSITER: They don't.

DOROTHY: Suppose Mr. Lucy told them?

MESSITER: Then he would probably share the same fate as his predecessor. *He* told them. They wouldn't believe him. Instead they made his life so wretched that he had to leave. You see, I am a very good parson, Miss Lister: from the technical point of view, that is. My popularity is immense. Haven't you noticed that I have an unexpected charm?

DOROTHY: Yes, I think I have.

NICHOLAS: The thought has just flitted across my mind that I perhaps might be able to do something. It so happens that Bishop Morris, in whose diocese Greenlake falls, is my uncle. I took the liberty of mentioning your name to him in connection with St. Anthony's. He was familiar already with your theological works, and expressed a desire to hear you preach. It is possible that he may come over and stay with me next week-end. Shall I ask him?

MESSITER *looks up quickly.*

MESSITER (*quietly*): Yes, ask him.

COSMO: There remains Mr. Lucy.

PAUL: No, let's stop this game.

NICHOLAS: I believe Miss Robinson is afraid of what I may say.

PAUL: I don't know why, but I think I am.

DOROTHY: Never mind; we can't allow exceptions. Mr. Lucy, what do you want?

NICHOLAS: I. (*He pauses.*) I must confess that I am something of a sceptic. By temperament I am

only able to believe what I see pushed immediately under my nose. I have no sense of the future or of the past: only of the present. I am no metaphysician: I can only believe in the one simple obvious reality. In short, I believe in God.

COSMO: Possibly then you also believe in the Devil?

NICHOLAS: But certainly. The Devil, after all, is only God's advertising agent: the Devil's complete failure being proof of God's success.

MAGNUS: But what of the Devil's complete successes?

NICHOLAS: With all possible respect to the Devil, for whose skill and industry I have the sincerest admiration, I am forced to disclose a secret: he has had none.

MESSITER: No complete successes? My dear Lucy, I protest, you're discourteous. What about me?

NICHOLAS (*with deference*): I am rebuked. I seem to have fallen into the pitfall of a generalization.

Yet somehow the polite withdrawal is not convincing.

DOROTHY: But doesn't it beg the question to say you believe in God? Do we know what the word means? I don't.

PAUL: What do *you* mean by God?

MR. LUCY *smiles faintly.*

NICHOLAS: You shall see.

ACT II

Scene I

A sunny Saturday afternoon a week later in the same room. When the Curtain rises, Nicholas *and* Paul *are locked tight and immobile in each other's arms. So they remain just long enough for us to be slightly embarrassed. At length* Paul *reluctantly presses him from her.*

Nicholas : My heart, my heart !

Paul : Dearest, we must come back from Heaven.

Nicholas : We can never come back now.

He kisses her ardently.

Paul (*freeing herself a little again*) : Oh, don't, please ! I can't think. I must think.

Nicholas : I love you and I love you and I love you.

Paul : It's not true. It couldn't be true.

Nicholas (*barely above a whisper*) : Why, my heart, why ?

Paul : Because I love you too : so much, so much.

Nicholas : My darling and my dear.

Paul : Oh, do let us try and think, try and straighten things out. I don't know where I am. My brain's whirling.

Nicholas : Let it whirl.

Paul : I tell you, I must think. Besides, someone might come in.

NICHOLAS: Let them come. Do you grudge them even the sight of joy?

PAUL: No, dear, please. (*Gently he looses her. She moves slowly across the room and leans her head and one shoulder against the wall, her eyes turned from him.*) It isn't all quite plain sailing. There's something you'll have to know. Perhaps you may have guessed already.

NICHOLAS (*unalarmed*): Is it so very dreadful?

PAUL: A clergyman might think so.

NICHOLAS: Come and sit down.

PAUL: No.

NICHOLAS: It will seem even more dreadful with twelve feet between us.

PAUL: But easier to say.

For answer he crosses to her, and, sitting against a table by her, takes her hand in both his own.

NICHOLAS: I'm ready.

PAUL: I've been living with D. C.

NICHOLAS (*gravely*): Oh.

PAUL: Not since I met you, you know.

NICHOLAS: Not since you met me. And what does he suspect?

PAUL: Nothing: yet. It just fell out—luckily.

NICHOLAS: I see. Well, go on.

PAUL: That's all.

NICHOLAS: That's all?

PAUL: Yes. Don't you mind?

NICHOLAS: Of course I mind. I'm jealous. How could I help being? It's greed, if you like. You see, I'm very greedy of you. (*Gently*) My darling and my dear.

He holds her hand for a long time to his lips.

PAUL: And it makes—no difference?

NICHOLAS: Did you think so little of me that you could have doubted?

PAUL (*hardly audible*): My dear!

She presses her handkerchief to her nose.

NICHOLAS: A clergyman might think it very dreadful, eh? A Christian clergyman?

PAUL: But don't you think it's wrong?

NICHOLAS: Of course I do. As you have noticed, I am a clergyman; but I didn't fall in love with a standard of morals. I fell in love with Paul.

PAUL: And I fell in love with Nicholas.

NICHOLAS: Try Nick. It's—er—homelier.

PAUL: Nick.

NICHOLAS: I suppose you loved him?

PAUL: I supposed so too till I met you. D. C. and I walked: you and I fly. That's the difference.

NICHOLAS: It was a big price to pay for a walk.

She shrugs slightly.

PAUL: Alone I hardly even walked. I crawled. I was lonely. And he was so ideally—companionable. I suppose also I was slightly flattered that a man like D. C. should find *me* companionable too. And he staged the thing so well: when he asked me, I mean. We might have been two characters in a one-act play; and somehow it seemed unthinkable to spoil the author's climax. It almost became a question of keeping my end up. Intellectual vanity, I suppose. But I liked him terribly: don't think I didn't. I do still; even more. He's the dearest person in the world. Do you think you understand?

NICHOLAS (*fondly*): Do *you* think I do?

Her eyes beaming, she nods.

PAUL (*breaking off as he draws her to him*): Somebody's coming.

She moves away from him. MAGNUS *comes in from the door on the left. He has some papers in his hand and an old hat on the back of his head. He does not remove it.*

MAGNUS: Hallo, Lucy. You come up for some tea?

NICHOLAS: Thank you. I should like some.

MAGNUS: Where's Cosmo?

PAUL: He went into the garden after lunch with a pile of books he's got to review. I haven't seen him since.

NICHOLAS: I rather wanted to talk to him. I've been meaning to all the week.

He makes for the garden.

MAGNUS: Here, don't go for a second. Do you mind just witnessing my signature?

NICHOLAS: Certainly.

MAGNUS *signs one of the papers.*

MAGNUS (*while* NICHOLAS *signs*): I suppose there's no sign of Louis and Dorothy yet?

PAUL: Not a trace.

NICHOLAS: Are you expecting them again?

MAGNUS (*filling his pipe*): Dorothy was due at lunch time. Louis I never expect. One learns not to. I asked him. He was supposed to meet Dorothy on the eleven-thirty, this morning. With luck, he may turn up at midnight. (*As* NICHOLAS *lays down the pen*) Thank you.

NICHOLAS: I gather he's unpunctual.

MAGNUS (*drily*): Yes; a little.

PAUL: I wonder he managed to arrive last week.

MAGNUS: That was only because he was invited for the week before. How is it you've been able to leave your uncle this afternoon?

NICHOLAS: The Bishop is taking tea with Mr. Messiter.

MAGNUS: Oh. So am I. What's the time?

PAUL: Nearly four.

MAGNUS: That chap Messiter is heading for a nervous breakdown.

NICHOLAS: I think Mrs. Messiter is a little anxious about him.

MAGNUS: The proximity of a Bishop's not too good for him.

NICHOLAS: My uncle certainly appears rather to have excited him. He lies awake at night dreaming of his sermon to-morrow. He repeatedly assures me that it will be no less than a historical sermon. That is his phrase. As soon as the last words are delivered, Greenlake, he says, will fall like a ripe plum into his mouth. I wish I could be present.

PAUL: But won't you be?

NICHOLAS: Mr. Messiter will have none of us inside the church: except Mr. Magnus. Not even me. I have to devise an excuse to the Bishop.

PAUL: I should have thought he would have liked us there.

MAGNUS: He says he wants nothing to distract his attention. I apparently am not distracting. Even Mrs. Messiter is to be excluded.

PAUL: Is she distracting?

MAGNUS (*to* NICHOLAS): If you want Cosmo, you'll probably find him round the front of the house.

NICHOLAS: Thank you. I'll look.

He goes out into the garden.

MAGNUS : I wish Louis were here, confound him.

PAUL : Why ? He will be sooner or later.

MAGNUS : You like him, don't you ?

PAUL : Of course I do.

MAGNUS : Would you be satisfied with him as a trustee ?

PAUL : As a trustee ? For what ?

MAGNUS : For you ?

PAUL (*growing nervous*) : What should I want with a trustee ? I don't want a trustee.

MAGNUS (*collecting the papers he has signed*) : I'm afraid you do. I've been making a settlement on you.

PAUL (*her mouth suddenly parched*) : What do you mean ? What for ?

MAGNUS : For life.

PAUL (*with unexpected violence*) : You're not to, do you hear ? You mustn't. I—I couldn't stand it.

MAGNUS (*surprised*) : Couldn't stand it ? What an unusual point of view !

PAUL : Please, D. C. darling, don't do it. It's heavenly of you, but I don't want you to : please.

MAGNUS : Never be sentimental about money, my dear. It's too important.

PAUL : It's you who're being sentimental. What's happened to the professional egotist now ?

MAGNUS : Never more active in his life. You don't suppose I'm making this settlement to please you ? Surely that's evident on the face of it, since all the objections are coming from you and not from me.

PAUL : Then why in the world *are* you doing it ?

MAGNUS : Simply to flatter my own vanity. It flatters my vanity to know that you are economically

free to leave me to-morrow and (*with something like tenderness*) that you don't.

PAUL: Oh! (*It is almost a cry. She passes a hand across her eyes, then, making up her mind, faces him.*) Listen to me, D. C. Don't do this. I want . . . There's something first to . . . you must give me time to think . . . you ought to——

COSMO *comes in.*

COSMO (*sleepily*): Is tea ready? I'm half-starved.

MAGNUS: Possibly: but it's the top half. Your lunch was enormous.

COSMO: Oh, D. C., how rude!

MAGNUS: Where have you been?

COSMO: Asleep on my little bed. I had to review the new Belloc.

MAGNUS: The Prince of Darkness was looking for you.

COSMO: He's premature. I happen to be feeling rather well. Where?

MAGNUS: In here. I sent him into the garden.

COSMO (*sniffing delicately*): Yes; sulphur, distinctly sulphur.

MAGNUS (*who has moved outside into the garden, calling*): Lucy! (*He waits.*) Cosmo's here. (*To* PAUL) Come and walk with me towards the Messiters.

Hat still on the back of his head, he saunters off, PAUL *following.* NICHOLAS *comes in, suave, detached.*

NICHOLAS: Ah, Mr. Penny!

COSMO (*bowing*): Ah, Mr. Lucy!

NICHOLAS: I was told you were in the garden.

COSMO: Too cruel! You wanted to talk to me.

NICHOLAS: Yes. I am, you know, a great admirer of your work.

COSMO : I did not know. How refreshing ! Perhaps I can sell you a set ?

NICHOLAS : You have done that already : at least your publishers have.

COSMO : Oh, that's a pity. But perhaps you have a young sister ?

NICHOLAS (*imperturbable*) : I'd like another book : a *new* book. When are we to expect one ?

COSMO : The devil only knows.

LUCY'S *eyebrows rise significantly.*

NICHOLAS : You should be more independent. What are you doing now ?

COSMO (*shrugging a little*) : Sixpenny journalism : the higher criticism at the lower wages.

NICHOLAS : I am, of course, very conscious of the curious similarity between your prose-style and that of the late Joseph Conrad.

COSMO : You are ? So am I.

NICHOLAS : I understand that the more discerning critics have remarked it too.

COSMO : Oh, they have. On the question of sales, however, the dissimilarity between us remains equally curious.

NICHOLAS : I am also interested because I happened to be a close friend of the late Joseph Conrad : a very close friend. That was really what I wanted to speak about. I concluded from *your* work that you must be at least sympathetically familiar with his. And I wanted your advice. (*He goes to the table and brings back a parcel from it.*) This is an unpublished Conrad manuscript : complete, though shorter than most. I would like you to read it. Nobody except myself has done so. Not even Mrs. Conrad. Nobody even

knows of its existence. He wrote it on a long holiday, and sent it to me before he died. He regarded it as his best book. So do I: immeasurably. I should be glad to have your view.

COSMO: Why was it never published?

NICHOLAS: It would have been, but he had already begun *Suspense* before he began this one, and was anxious that *Suspense*, obviously a faultier book, should appear first. He thought it might suffer if it followed this one. I think he was right. Unfortunately, as you know, *Suspense* was never finished.

COSMO: Of course I'd like to read it, but where do you need advice?

NICHOLAS: I will tell you when you have read it. In the meantime may I rely on you to speak of it to nobody?

COSMO: You're being very mysterious.

NICHOLAS: I am sorry. But you will agree that I have been justified.

COSMO: Very well. (*He takes the parcel.*) Have you had tea?

NICHOLAS: No.

COSMO: Are you hungry?

NICHOLAS: Slightly hungry.

COSMO: I am extremely hungry. We will go seek what we may devour. (*From the door on the left, however,* DOROTHY, *dressed in a hat and travelling-tailor-made, comes in.*) Darling! You've arrived.

DOROTHY: All right. So have you.

COSMO: I never left. I've been here all the week.

DOROTHY: Good afternoon, Mr. Lucy.

NICHOLAS: Good afternoon. I was told you were expected this morning.

DOROTHY: I couldn't get away. I had a rehearsal.

COSMO: Last week-end, as far as I remember, you had a husband. Where is he now?

DOROTHY: I imagine he missed the train. He usually can when he puts his mind to it. He was to have met me at the station. Louis isn't very good at stations. A station is his particular hell.

COSMO: Was he the Louis who said "Le gare, c'est moi"?

DOROTHY: Cosmo, that doesn't mean anything. Besides, it's *la* gare.

COSMO: Is it? I never did like the French.

NICHOLAS: I received your letter, Miss Lister: yesterday morning.

DOROTHY: Oh, my contract. I'm sorry not to have sent it before. I forgot all about it.

NICHOLAS: I think I have some good news for you.

DOROTHY (*eagerly*): No. Have you been through it?

NICHOLAS: Are you certain that it is not too late? Have they perhaps found another Lady Macbeth by now?

DOROTHY: No, they haven't. I happen to know.

NICHOLAS (*taking the contract from his pocket*): When is your first night?

DOROTHY: Next Thursday, the 15th.

NICHOLAS: So I understood. (*He hands her her agreement.*) I have marked Clause 7. Perhaps you will read it. (*She does so.*) That is a loophole that it needed no lawyer to discover. Thursday, the 15th.

He waits, while she finishes.

DOROTHY (*at length*): Well, I'm blowed. I might

have noticed that for myself. But—but is that—are you sure it's quite water-tight?

NICHOLAS: Quite sure.

She ponders a moment.

COSMO: Dorothy, are you hungry?

DOROTHY: No.

COSMO: Damn.

He goes into the dining-room.

NICHOLAS: To whom must you write making known your decision?

DOROTHY: What decision?

NICHOLAS: That you intend to resign your present part? The post leaves in twenty minutes. It might be fairer to the management if you wrote at once.

DOROTHY: I can't write now. I must think it over.

NICHOLAS: Think it over? I imagined you had already done so before I offered to examine your agreement. I must have misunderstood.

DOROTHY: No, it's not that. (*Making excuses*) I'm wondering if—if I'm quite safe: whether I could be sued for breach of contract.

NICHOLAS: You could be sued, but not successfully.

DOROTHY: I'm not sure that I'd care to risk it.

NICHOLAS: Believe me, the risk is so negligible that I am more than willing to go surety myself for any damages that you could be liable for.

DOROTHY: That's very kind of you: but they might be very heavy indeed.

NICHOLAS: I assure you I could afford them. I am quite disgustingly rich.

DOROTHY: Still, it does seem hard on that young man.

NICHOLAS: You mean the misguided author?

DOROTHY: Yes, and the rest of the cast. Think of it: four days before the opening night!

NICHOLAS: Have you an understudy?

DOROTHY: Yes, but she's no good. And she hasn't had time to learn the part yet.

NICHOLAS: It is for you to decide. I should not have interfered, but I understood that you were really anxious to play in *Macbeth*.

DOROTHY (*torn two ways*): Oh, I am, I am! God knows I never wanted anything so much before.

NICHOLAS (*his eyebrows slightly raised*): And yet you hesitate?

DOROTHY (*after a while*): When do you say the post goes?

NICHOLAS: In a quarter of an hour.

He moves to the writing-desk and opens the blotter on it. Slowly DOROTHY *crosses to it, sits down and begins to write,* NICHOLAS *standing complacently by.* COSMO *opens the dining-room door and pokes his head in.*

COSMO (*to* NICHOLAS, *eagerly, in a whisper, his mouth full of food*): Tea is ready.

His head vanishes again.

NICHOLAS: I will follow you. (*At the door he turns to* DOROTHY.) Ellen will post your letter. Shall I send her to you?

DOROTHY (*still writing*): Thank you.

Left alone, she finishes her letter. Shortly ELLEN *appears.*

ELLEN: Mr. Lucy said you wanted me, madam.

DOROTHY (*after licking up her envelope*): Yes. I—I—— (*She crosses to the maid, her letter in her hand. Then she hesitates.*) I only wanted to—to say that

Mr. Kisch will probably arrive by a later train. My bag is in the hall.

ELLEN: Yes, madam. Is that all?

DOROTHY: Yes, thank you.

ELLEN: Thank you, madam.

When ELLEN *has gone,* DOROTHY *strays slowly back to the desk. Slowly she tears the letter across twice and drops it into the waste-paper basket.*

SCENE II

Before the Curtain is raised, the sound of fairly remote church-bells is heard. It is next day—Sunday morning. COSMO *is alone, reading the Conrad typescript. He finishes the last page and remains some time gazing reflectively, inanimate, in front of him. Finally, passing a hand vigorously over his face and through his hair, he gets up and paces the room restlessly. Then he stops, takes a cake of chocolate from his pocket, unwraps it, eats it. Soon from the garden* NICHOLAS *appears, hat in hand. The church-bells cease.*

NICHOLAS : Good morning.

COSMO : Good morning. Come in.

NICHOLAS *comes in.*

NICHOLAS : Thank you. Are you alone ?

COSMO : Yes. Paul and Dorothy have taken Mrs. Messiter for a walk. She's rather on edge about her husband. And D. C.'s gone to church like a lamb to the slaughter.

NICHOLAS : And Mr. Kisch ?

COSMO : Louis has not yet arrived. The general opinion is that he somehow missed the train last night. The general opinion is that somehow he also missed it this morning.

NICHOLAS : Some people like a long week-end and some a short one. I suppose you have barely had time to look at my manuscript yet ?

COSMO : I finished it exactly three minutes ago.

NICHOLAS : You've been quick.

COSMO : I should have finished it last night, but my eyes gave out about half-past two. They do sometimes.

NICHOLAS : And your opinion is ?

COSMO : My considered opinion is that every other book he ever wrote, even *Lord Jim*, seems literally amateurish by comparison.

NICHOLAS : That was the author's view. It is saying a great deal.

COSMO : If there was anything more to say, I'd say it. It is impossible for even me to be flippant in the face of it.

NICHOLAS : That is generous praise. Don't think me guilty of an easy compliment if I express my conviction that one day you will write such a book.

COSMO : You are encouraging. I had almost decided to write no more.

NICHOLAS : Mr. Magnus believes that encouragement is the only asset that you lack. I remember his saying once that as soon as one book succeeds——

COSMO : All the earlier ones will be hailed as masterpieces ! D. C.'s judgment is suspect. He likes me.

NICHOLAS : And you yourself, I recall, declared that as soon as one of your books succeeds, you will write better.

COSMO : I think I should. But one of my books has not succeeded : nor is one likely to ; so long as I write it.

NICHOLAS : May I suggest, therefore, that you do not write it ?

COSMO : What do you mean ?

NICHOLAS : I mean the next one.

COSMO : Am I being very obtuse ?

NICHOLAS : I will make myself clear. These last

few days an idea has been flitting across the back of my mind. It occurred to me that your purpose might be served if you were to publish this.

His hand is on the manuscript.

COSMO (*when power of speech comes to him*): You mean —under my own name?

NICHOLAS: Why, certainly. It would scarcely do you much good under mine.

COSMO: Are you stark, staring mad?

NICHOLAS: I don't think so, but I may not be the best judge. You seem surprised at my proposal?

COSMO: Did you suppose it was precisely what I might have expected from a Christian priest?

NICHOLAS: But why not? Is it not for us to set the example of Christian charity, of helping as best we can all whom we may encounter by the wayside?

COSMO: Of robbing Peter to pay Paul? Is that Christianity?

NICHOLAS: Pauline Christianity perhaps. But that is not what I am doing. Aren't you forgetting that Conrad is dead? How, therefore, could my friend possibly benefit by the publication of this book in his name?

COSMO: His reputation can benefit.

NICHOLAS: His reputation! What do you imagine he cares for his reputation now? And you once chid Miss Lister for sentimentality! I confess, Mr. Penny, I had expected to find you more of a realist.

COSMO: D. C. defined that as alternative term for a blackguard.

NICHOLAS: May I leave the term and withdraw the offence?

COSMO: Your only offence lay in ever supposing

that I would purloin another man's work, and therefore his royalties, at the expense of his legatees. Surely not even a realist would define that as a Christian act?

NICHOLAS: Don't you scuttle rather suddenly to Christianity for shelter as soon as your sentimental shibboleths are threatened with dispassionate examination? No doubt you will regard it as a cruel, heartless question if I ask you what possible moral claim an author's legatees can lay to his royalties. Did they do his work or did he?

COSMO: Do his wishes constitute no claim?

NICHOLAS: None whatever. These legatees have a moral claim not to be left in poverty; but not because of his wishes: merely because they are human beings, and every human being has that moral claim. The question of poverty, however, does not enter into our case. It is simply a question of a few hundred pounds more or less. And do you seriously imagine that Joseph Conrad would not have bequeathed to you a few hundred pounds, had he known that your work and therefore English letters in general would benefit? Which after all is what we are assuming.

COSMO: A rather handsome assumption.

NICHOLAS: That may or may not be. But even if we are wrong, how much harm will have been done?

COSMO: Well, for a start I should probably find myself in gaol for fraud. What guarantees should I have against exposure?

NICHOLAS: Ah! (*He beams at him, then claps him gently on the shoulder.*) Spoken like a realist!

COSMO: Very likely, but that's not an answer.

NICHOLAS: Guarantees? How can you be exposed

when nobody in the world save you and I know that this work exists ?

COSMO : For all I know that may be a lie. Or alternatively when the thing is out you might double-cross me, blackmail me.

NICHOLAS : Which would involve me as an accomplice before the fact. Besides, I am a rich man, you are a poor one. But I can give you an even more concrete proof that I am telling you the truth. When could you come to my house ?

COSMO : I suppose I could come to-night, or—— Ah, hail, smiling morn.

For at that moment MRS. MESSITER, *followed by* DOROTHY *and* PAUL, *appears in the garden.*

NICHOLAS : Good morning, Miss Lister.

DOROTHY (*without enthusiasm*) : Good morning.

PAUL *and* NICHOLAS *exchange glances, but not greetings.*

NICHOLAS : Come and sit down, Mrs. Messiter. You don't look well.

MRS. MESSITER : Well, I *have* rather got my neuralgia again.

PAUL : Besides this is a red-letter day for you.

MRS. MESSITER : I'm sure I'd be very satisfied for my part to stay where we are. I mean we can do just as much good in a small parish as a large one.

PAUL (*kindly*) : But Mr. Messiter doesn't think so : and you must want him to be a success.

MRS. MESSITER : Oh yes, of course.

PAUL : Which he will be.

NICHOLAS : I happen to know that so far the impression he has made upon my uncle is quite excellent.

MRS. MESSITER : Well, I'm sure I'm very glad :

though Herbert is not well, not at all well. Still, I suppose these things are sent to try us. However, I don't think I shall be found wanting. Which unfortunately could not be said of everyone. I suppose that's why not everyone is a clergyman's wife.

COSMO: Why, surely: there can be no other possible reason.

NICHOLAS: I was thinking last night that you, Miss Lister, might have made an admirable one.

DOROTHY: Clergyman's wife?

NICHOLAS: Yes. In outlook and character you and Mrs. Messiter are so very similar.

DOROTHY:
MRS. MESSITER (*simultaneously*): } What *do* you mean?

NICHOLAS: How should I put it? You both have a certain simple piety, a forgetfulness of self that is so pretty. Mr. Penny called it sentimental, but that depends on the point of view, doesn't it? I chanced on quite a touching example of it yesterday.

DOROTHY: I doubt if this is very interesting.

NICHOLAS: If I am being a bore, please stop me. What was I saying? Oh yes, yesterday. I wanted a scrap of waste-paper to make a note on after tea; so I drew a scrap from the waste-paper basket. It was then that I first fully realized the qualities that you and Mrs. Messiter have so strikingly in common.

DOROTHY (*flaring suddenly*): I suppose you think nosing in other people's dustbins is a dignified pastime!

NICHOLAS (*mildly surprised*): Is the action I described fairly defined as nosing?

DOROTHY: Very fairly. You wouldn't like me to tell these people the whole story, would you?

NICHOLAS: But certainly. Why not?

DOROTHY: Very well: I will. Mr. Lucy has been urging me to take advantage of a paltry technical error in my agreement with my present management in order that I may play Lady Macbeth.

NICHOLAS: But wasn't it true that you *wanted* to play Lady Macbeth, wanted to very badly indeed?

DOROTHY: Quite true. It is also true, as you very well understood, that my present play, if I threw it up four days before its opening, would be wrecked, the management would lose its money, the cast would be out of work within a week, and the author would lose his chance *and* his poor little pennies.

COSMO: Well, I'm damned!

NICHOLAS (*coolly*): Yet I distinctly remember Mr. Penny describing all that as a foolish sentimental consideration.

COSMO: Very likely: but in my view of things a parson *ought* to be a fool.

DOROTHY: Hear, hear!

NICHOLAS: I am sorry not to conform to your standards, and I am sorry, Miss Lister, if I touched you on a sensitive spot. (*Provocatively*) I did not intend the word "sentimental" as a term of reproach.

DOROTHY: I don't care what you intended. I happen to be about the least sentimental person in the world.

NICHOLAS (*with a sly glance of understanding at Cosmo*): I think I know at least one of us who is less so.

COSMO: If, as I gather from that remark, you imagine for a moment that I propose to use your damned manuscript, you're mistaken.

NICHOLAS (*courteously*): As you please, my friend; of course.

COSMO: I think I can cap your story, Dorothy. Our precious curate——

PAUL: Is there any need to be childishly rude?

COSMO: There's every need and, if you felt like I do, you'd understand it. I say our precious curate solemnly suggested this morning that I should publish under my own name an unknown manuscript by Joseph Conrad that by some mysterious means he's managed to get hold of.

PAUL: You didn't!

NICHOLAS (*imperturbable*): I did.

DOROTHY: I'm not in the least surprised.

MRS. MESSITER: I must say, Mr. Lucy, it was hardly the kind of thing one would expect from a—well, clergyman. Nor was your advice to Miss Lister.

PAUL: Did you give that advice?

NICHOLAS: Indeed I did. Miss Lister was in a dilemma. I showed her the way out.

DOROTHY: At other people's expense.

NICHOLAS: We must sometimes sacrifice others as well as ourselves, in order to achieve what we believe to be right. Miss Lister, I understand, is a great artist. So also is Mr. Penny; even though at present he lacks due recognition. Is their art not worth some sacrifice? Besides Art, we are constantly told in this enlightened century, transcends mere Morality. It is the one point on which artists appear to be agreed. Art and Morals have nothing to do with each other. Isn't that the maxim? (*With irony*) I seem to have heard it. For myself I should reply, then so much

the worse for Art. But a priest must sometimes t y and see the other man's point of view.

DOROTHY: You're a clever devil, aren't you?

NICHOLAS: It's very kind of you, but I believe no cleverer than any other devil. What do you say, Miss Robinson? Are you on my side or the side of the angels?

PAUL (*defiantly*): I am very definitely on your side; though you certainly commit an error of tact in calling them sentimental angels. But that's what they are. Their wings flutter with panic at the first breath of realism.

COSMO (*with a little groan*): Oh, that word!

PAUL: The sole trouble is that *you* had the courage of *their* convictions. And they hadn't. That's what rankles.

COSMO: A Daniel come to judgment!

PAUL: I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be rude. But you've all been rather rude to Mr. Lucy.

MAGNUS *appears in the garden.*

MRS. MESSITER (*rising in some agitation*): What's the matter? Why are you back so early?

MAGNUS (*quietly grave*): Don't be alarmed. The service is over.

He puts his hat down.

MRS. MESSITER: Service over? It can't be. It barely began half an hour ago.

MAGNUS: Now you must try not to upset yourself, Mrs. Messiter. There's been a little disturbance. I came back especially to tell you myself.

MRS. MESSITER: He's not dead? Is he dead?

MAGNUS: No, certainly not. There was just an incident. And—well, your husband got slightly

excited. Everybody will understand that he was taken ill.

MESSITER: I was not ill.

There he stands in the garden doorway, hatless, his face dead-white, his eyes smouldering.

MRS. MESSITER: Herbert! (*It is a cry. She goes to him quickly, but, ignoring her, he moves forward heavily, slowly into the room.*) Are you all right? Say you're all right.

MAGNUS: Of course he's all right. Still, I should come upstairs and lie down a bit if I were you. It was a nasty experience.

MESSITER (*sardonically, barely above his breath*): A very nasty experience! The nastiest life holds. To be made a fool of.

MRS. MESSITER: Never you mind, Herbert. Come along home with me.

MESSITER (*still not heeding her; with a slow, sardonic look at the others*): Poor people, who were not at the church! They missed the Great Exhibition. They missed the fun. And all my fault. I would not let them come.

MAGNUS: You come upstairs, old man, and have a rest. *I'll* tell Mrs. Messiter what happened.

MESSITER: And cheat the others? The others who are aching in every bone with curiosity? No. They shall see and hear for themselves. They shall have a special private performance.

Grinning repellently, he lets fall a ponderous glance on each of them in turn. Then moving to a chair, he mounts it and stands there a moment, his hands clasping his lapels, a lumbering, boorish figure.

MRS. MESSITER: Oh, Herbert, don't!

MESSITER (*quietly*): In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.

NICHOLAS: Amen.

He is the only person present who is in no way discomfited.

MESSITER: The twenty-first chapter of the gospel according to Saint John, the twenty-ninth verse: "Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed; blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed." My friends, that verse refers, as you may remember, to the incident when our Lord appeared in person to Thomas after the Resurrection, because Thomas had found it hard to believe the story of the Resurrection at all as related to him by the other apostles.

MRS. MESSITER (*in tears*): Oh, Herbert, Herbert!

MESSITER (*without turning to her*): Be quiet, Beatrice.

So MRS. MESSITER *tries to cry more quietly.*

MESSITER: Now, according to the other three gospels not only Thomas but his fellow apostles also were unable to believe in the resurrection. Now, why does St. John's gospel differ from the others on this point? Surely it is because St. John claimed himself to be one of the apostles; Matthew, Mark and Luke did not. To admit that all twelve doubted would have been to admit that he, John, also doubted and so, it appears, that he preferred to make poor Thomas the scapegoat for them all. And Thomas has become Doubting Thomas for us down to this day. Now, this instance is very typical of those differences in the four gospels that unbelievers have fastened upon in their vain attempt to prove that the history of Our Lord is not history at all, but legend. They suggest

that because the four historians differ in detail they have therefore no true history to record.

MRS. MESSITER: Herbert!

MESSITER: But surely, the truly wonderful thing is not that these four chroniclers differ so much but that they differ so little. Send four people of different classes and character to report without notebooks—or even with them—the proceedings at any meeting or lecture to-day and you will receive back accounts so contradictory as to be laughable. But Matthew, Mark, Luke and John had not merely one lecture to report, but hundreds: their narrative does not cover a mere hour or two of time, but over thirty years of a man's life. Moreover, only one of them, John, claims to have been present at all, and even his claims are disputed. The others compiled their story admittedly trom nothing more than hearsay. Should we not fherefore be far more astonished that these four biographers vary so little than that they vary at all? Consider for a moment the four evangelists and their widely different temperaments and up-bringing. St. John is the best educated and the strongest in argument and he, as we might expect, draws Our Lord as a tireless and first-rate debater. Luke, the artist, the romantic, embellished his tale with every kind of literary fancy and displays the born story-teller's relish for all the miracles and parables. Matthew gives us a Jesus who is rough-tongued, combative, provocative; but Luke softens this portrait till certain sentimental Victorians were tempted to go yet a step further and creat the quite unwarrantable and, I think, uninspiring fiction of a "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild."

MRS. MESSITER (*whimpering pitiably*): Oh, don't: please stop, please!

MESSITER (*roughly*): Stop snivelling, Beatrice. (*He says it without so much as looking at her, and continues in his earnest pulpit manner*) My friends, ask yourselves could any other biography in the world, written by four such different men in such haphazard circumstances, exhibit so little inconsistency as this? Is not this reflection an incomparable support to us in our belief? But here is the question that I beg you earnestly to consider to-day. There are several kinds of belief. Which shall be yours? "Blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed." We are told that seeing is believing. Yes, but such belief is too easy: it is faith in its lowest form. Ask yourselves, dear friends, each one of you, how far can you believe *without* seeing. There is the true test of your faith. (*His voice now rises in an infectious rhetorical crescendo.*) Can you believe without seeing, without seeing object, reason or cause? Can you see poverty, disease, misery, sin and death all about you and still believe that God is good, that God is omnipotent, that God is omnipresent? "Blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed." (*Suddenly he stops dead. Not a sound is heard but* MRS. MESSITER'S *whimpering. When he speaks again, still addressing himself to no one in particular, seeing no one, his speech is scarcely above a whisper.*) Then I heard a voice speaking and sounding—like *my* voice. It said: I don't believe. Do you hear? I don't belive. It's all fiddlededee. Fiddlededee. Rank fiddlededee. A malicious tale invented to enslave us. (*His voice rises again, but this time with something very like frenzy.*) "Behold, thy

King cometh, sitting on an ass's colt." Well, I at least am not that ass's colt. Do you hear? And I won't be. Go on, God; strike me dead! You heard me: you heard me!

MRS. MESSITER: Herbert, Herbert: stop please!

MESSITER (*turning on her with a falsetto scream, the tears streaming down his face*): Shut up! Shut up! Do you want to spoil the fun? Have you no sense of humour? Can't you see I'm the King's Jester, the King of Heaven's? Can't you let God's Fool cut his capers in peace? Can't you——

But suddenly he interrupts himself, pressing his sleeve impetuously to his mouth. He moves not very steadily to the garden-door, of which the lower half only is closed. He leans over it, swaying slightly, and there MAGNUS *goes to him.*

COSMO (*after a moment: to* MAGNUS): Can I do anything?

MAGNUS (*preoccupied with* MESSITER): No, it's all right. He's just—he's just being sick.

MRS. MESSITER *still whimpers.*

ACT III

The same room. Early the following morning. MAGNUS, *half-sitting on his desk, his hat hanging on the back of his head, reads his Monday letters.* DOROTHY, *seated near him and dressed for departure, is drawing on her gloves. Presently* COSMO *appears, burdened with a suit-case in either hand.*

COSMO: This *is* yours, isn't it, Dorothy?

DOROTHY: Yes, the little one.

COSMO (*feeling his strained arm ruefully*): Little! Six inches larger and you'd need a crane.

DOROTHY: My dear, it can't possibly be heavy. There's practically nothing in it but a pair of pyjamas.

COSMO: Then I should very much like to meet the blacksmith who makes your pyjamas. Have you ever tried to carry it?

DOROTHY: I can't say I have. There's never been any occasion.

COSMO: There easily may be this morning. D. C., you're coming with us to the station?

MAGNUS: I can't. I'm sorry. I must wait for Mrs. Messiter.

COSMO (*with one eye sadly on* DOROTHY'S *bag*): Are you *sure* you can't come to the station with us?

MAGNUS: Quite sure.

COSMO: What a pity.

DOROTHY: Well, D. C., many thanks for the week-end. It's been simply horrible.

COSMO : It's been dreadful. (*still contemplating the bags*) And it's not quite over yet.

MAGNUS : Louis had a sound instinct of self-preservation.

COSMO : Do you think that's why he didn't come ?

DOROTHY (*drily*) : No, my own view is that he missed the train ; in fact, all of them.

COSMO : Anyhow it's been Hell.

He feeds himself again with chocolate from his pocket.

MAGNUS (*as he opens another letter*) : It has. But you must blame the Prince of Darkness for that. He seems to bring his own atmosphere with him.

MRS. MESSITER *comes in. She has come to do her duty : that austere resolve is in the very aspect of her.*

MRS. MESSITER (*to all three*) : Good morning, good morning, good morning.

DOROTHY :
COSMO (*simultaneously*) : } Good morning.

MAGNUS : Ah, Mrs. Messiter, I was expecting you. Your husband is getting up. He seems perfectly well again this morning.

MRS. MESSITER (*suppressing her anxiety*) : Oh, I was quite sure he would be.

MAGNUS : He slept solidly from five o'clock yesterday until about an hour ago.

MRS. MESSITER : Herbert always sleeps well.

MAGNUS : I hope you had a good night too.

MRS. MESSITER : Well, why shouldn't I ?

DOROTHY (*kindly*) : You must have had a very worrying day yesterday.

MRS. MESSITER : Those of us who dedicate our lives to God, Miss Lister, must expect worries, you see.

DOROTHY: A kind of tit-for-tat, you mean.

MRS. MESSITER (*vaguely*): Well, I suppose it takes all sorts to make a world.

COSMO: It seems a pity, but I suppose it does. D. C., now that you've seen Mrs. Messiter, perhaps you'll come to the station with us.

MRS. MESSITER: Please don't stop in on my account, Mr. Magnus.

MAGNUS: Very well, if you prefer it. Messiter will be down any minute.

DOROTHY: We ought to go. I make a point of never missing a train unless I'm with my own husband.

COSMO: How charmingly old-world!

DOROTHY: Good-bye, Mrs. Messiter.

MRS. MESSITER: Good-bye.

They shake hands.

COSMO: Good-bye, Mrs. Messiter. I hope your husband will soon be well again.

MRS. MESSITER: Thank you. Good-bye.

They shake hands.

MAGNUS (*grinning*): Perhaps you'd like me to give you a hand with those bags?

COSMO: Oh, don't bother: but just as you like.

MAGNUS: Which shall I take?

COSMO (*giving him* DOROTHY'S *resolutely*): Whichever you please: it doesn't really matter.

He meets MAGNUS' *twinkle with a dead-serious eye.*

MAGNUS (*as he follows them out*): Perhaps I shall see you when I come back, Mrs. Messiter.

MRS. MESSITER: Oh, we shall probably be gone. (MAGNUS *nods and goes. Alone*, MRS. MESSITER'S *composure suddenly leaves her. She becomes fidgety, nervous, concerned; picks at her clothes and at the chair she sits on.*

She even goes to the length of adjusting her hat in the mirror, and it is while she does so that one fears for a moment that she is going to cry. Presently Messiter comes in. He is heavy-footed, dull-eyed. Almost he seems shrunken: like a pricked bladder. At his appearance MRS. MESSITER *braces herself gallantly to a pathetic brightness, but her husband's eye only rests on her for a dull moment; then passes on pointlessly to other objects. Beaming bravely, she speaks.*) Good morning, Herbert. (*He does not seem to hear.*) Mr. Magnus tells me you've had such a lovely sleep. (*He is staring, without seeing, into the garden and does not move.* MRS. MESSITER *chirrups on doggedly.*) It *is* a lovely morning, isn't it? Though the wind's really quite—well, brisk. (*Brighter and brighter*) Mind you, I wouldn't really be surprised myself if we had seen the end of this summer. Personally I wouldn't. (*Another pause.*) Summer proper, of course.

MESSITER: Oh, of course.

It is only a heavy echo of his normal caustic delivery.

MRS. MESSITER: Summers *do* get so—well, short now, don't they? Not that I really mind much: personally.

MESSITER (*turning to her; dully*): You're in high spirits.

MRS. MESSITER (*almost giggling*): Well, you see, it's such a lovely morning.

MESSITER: Do you know what's to happen to us?

MRS. MESSITER: No, but I suppose I soon shall.

MESSITER: Do you understand I shall be kicked out of the Church—the Church you're so devoted to?

MRS. MESSITER (*still beaming*): Oh, well, you know, there are lots of ways of leading a useful, holy life

outside the Church as well as inside. I hope I'm not narrow-minded.

MESSITER (*coming to her*): Don't you understand that your husband has made a fool, an exhibition of himself—a ludicrous exhibition?

MRS. MESSITER: My dear, we're all—well, human, aren't we? We must expect to make mistakes, to do what we don't intend sometimes. Even St. Peter denied our Lord thrice.

MESSITER: Peter did it for Peter's sake. I did it for God's sake. *I* had nothing to gain. Can't you see? Your God tricked me. I was like a squib that went off too soon. And now he's laughing at me.

MRS. MESSITER (*placidly*): Now, Herbert, you're not to get excited again.

Which is what he was doing. He sits beside her. Surprisingly he takes one of her hands in his and stares at it. Then he sighs: indeed it is very like moaning. Closing his eyes, he presses her hand to his forehead.

MESSITER: Oh, I'm so tired, so tired.

Delighted she draws his head on to her shoulder.

MRS. MESSITER: There now, dear. Don't you think any more about it. Do you know what I always say? When a thing is done, it's done. That's what I always say. Always. Besides, it wasn't really your fault. Personally, I blame that dreadful, creepy Mr. Lucy. He worked on your nerves somehow. And no wonder. Ever since he came you've been different: excitable and—well, jumpy. (*She rocks him gently to and fro.*) And we'll find somewhere to go all right and something to do. It'll be quite a—well, adventure to start afresh. And, after all, you know I'm not so very old. (*She giggles.*) What is it they say? There's life

in the old girl yet? (*She giggles again.*) Oh dear, people do say such quaint things, don't they? (*Through the garden comes* MR. LUCY. *He sees them first, but as soon as* MRS. MESSITER *notices him, she pushes her husband's head hurriedly back into the vertical.*) Good morning, MR. LUCY.

NICHOLAS: Good morning, Mrs. Messiter. (*To* MESSITER *blandly*) And how is your husband this morning?

MESSITER (*hostilely*): What do *you* want?

NICHOLAS: I came up to enquire after you. Also I have a message.

MESSITER: Then take it elsewhere.

He is still holding MRS. MESSITER'S *hand.*

MRS. MESSITER (*gently*): Oh, Herbert.

NICHOLAS: I was talking with my uncle until late last night.

MESSITER: I'm not interested.

NICHOLAS: Yet it concerned you.

MESSITER: No doubt.

NICHOLAS: I am sure Mrs. Messiter at least is interested. My news, quite briefly, is that you will not be remaining much longer in this parish.

MESSITER: Do you suppose that's news?

NICHOLAS: And that your appointment to the parish of St. Anthony in Greenlake will be published very shortly.

MRS. MESSITER *looks up at him quickly: her husband very, very slowly.*

MRS. MESSITER: Is that—is that a dreadful joke?

NICHOLAS: It *is* a kind of joke, isn't it? I admire your sense of humour.

MRS. MESSITER: You know that's not what I meant.

NICHOLAS: You meant, is it true? It's perfectly true. You don't believe me?

MESSITER (*sullenly menacing*): What's your game?

NICHOLAS: Is it really so surprising? I conclude that you are thinking of yesterday's sermon. We discussed that point, the Bishop and I, at some length. I presumed to call his attention to the moral of that unfortunate episode, as it presented itself to me. Here, I said, is a man who believes so strongly in God that he could not bear to pretend to believe in him when he didn't! How ardent, I said, must be the faith of a man who would rather destroy himself than affirm a faith that he did not hold. A man who would publicly proclaim his hate of God rather than achieve his own heart's desire, must love God well indeed. Such a man, I said, is surely a true servant of God, of his conscience, of his sense of right, of truth. My uncle is a wise old gentleman. The argument had already occurred to him. My advocacy was unnecessary. He would have decided on your appointment even without me.

He smiles on them triumphantly.

MRS. MESSITER: I—I don't understand.

MESSITER (*grimly*): *I* do. (*To* NICHOLAS) And do you imagine that I shall accept the appointment?

NICHOLAS (*still bland*): I have no idea. The point seems to me quite unimportant.

MESSITER *looks at him for a moment without expression; then turns away.*

MESSITER: Let's go home.

MRS. MESSITER: Yes, dear.

But his glance wanders back sullenly to NICHOLAS.

MESSITER: Who *are* you?

NICHOLAS (*with the slightest affectation of surprise*): I? Why, just a poor devil striving to do his appointed work.

Still, for a moment or two, MESSITER *looks at him.*

MESSITER (*collecting himself*): Where's my hat?

MRS. MESSITER (*all her brightness resumed*): It's at home, dear. You left it in the—well, vestry. (*And now, as he had looked at Nicholas, so he looks at his wife. It is almost as if he sees her for the first time. Then grimly, deliberately he puts his arm about her narrow shoulders and leads her slowly away through the garden. So as not to dislocate this entrancing arrangement, she does not turn her head when, as they pass him, she addresses* NICHOLAS *with a glad, an almost perky chirrup that is no longer assumed.*) Good morning, Mr. Lucy.

NICHOLAS *inclines his head suavely, and they are gone. Alone he goes to the dining-room door and peers in. As he does so,* PAUL *opens the other door. She stands still in front of it.*

PAUL (*softly, happily*): Nick.

NICHOLAS (*echoing her gladness*): I was looking for you.

PAUL: I heard your voice, but waited for the Messiters to go.

He goes to her. She meets him. They embrace.

NICHOLAS: My heart.

PAUL: Darling.

NICHOLAS: I love you and I love you and I love you.

PAUL: Dear, do you know my blood is singing, literally singing? For joy.

NICHOLAS (*as he kisses her again*): *Our* blood is singing. (*For a long moment, still in each other's arms, they look at each other, just smiling happily.*) When are you going to marry me?

PAUL (*nestling closer*): After lunch, if you like.

NICHOLAS: Why not before? Would it spoil your meal?

PAUL: Spoil it? I feel as though I shall never want to eat again.

NICHOLAS: An unquestionable asset in any wife.

And again he kisses her.

PAUL (*without attempting to move*): Supposing somebody comes in?

NICHOLAS: Then they must sit down quietly till we've finished.

She smiles happily.

PAUL: Isn't it a gorgeous day? I adore autumn sunlight.

NICHOLAS: So do I. It's as though it had been cooled with pure water.

PAUL: Is it warm out?

NICHOLAS: Fairly.

PAUL: What a funny position we're in for talking about the weather!

NICHOLAS: I don't agree. It's the first time I've ever really enjoyed talking about the weather.

PAUL: I'd rather talk about ourselves.

NICHOLAS: Then when will you marry me?

PAUL (*suddenly grave*): Talk about something else.

NICHOLAS (*concerned*): Why?

PAUL: I want to go on dreaming. (*She looks at his face, sees incomprehension there, and looses herself gently, with a bitter little laugh.*) Haven't you realized yet that

this is only a short silly dream? I lay awake till five o'clock this morning thinking about it: crying most of the time.

NICHOLAS: I don't understand.

PAUL: Don't you? D. C.

NICHOLAS: But he can't keep you if you want to come to me.

PAUL: Want to! (*She laughs harshly again.*) God, how I want to!

NICHOLAS: Well?

PAUL: But he wants *me*.

NICHOLAS: And don't I? I want to *marry* you.

PAUL: He offered to.

NICHOLAS: Then it's for you to choose. Is it so hard?

PAUL: He's made a big settlement on me: unconditionally. He sacrificed five thousand a year for me. He even offered to marry me. That's how much he wants me. How can I leave him flat?

NICHOLAS: Wouldn't I do as much?

PAUL: Yes, dear. And through him I met you. It's the old story: when it comes to the point, free love is bondage.

NICHOLAS: But listen: you love me.

PAUL: How I love you!

NICHOLAS: Then how could you bear to continue with him?

PAUL: I don't know how I shall. It will be hell. Poor D. C.

NICHOLAS: You shall not. (*He walks up and down the room, thinking. Then, his mind made up, he halts in front of her.*) Listen: the conviction has just crossed the back of my mind that you must act at once. You

must speak to Magnus. (*She opens her mouth to speak, but he overbears her.*) No, hear what I say. We are faced with a simple problem in arithmetic: your happiness and mine against his; two to one. We each have forty or fifty years before us, he has twenty or twenty-five. Eighty years are just four times as important as twenty. You must tell him the truth: quite simply.

PAUL: I can't, I can't.

NICHOLAS: You spoke yesterday about realism.

PAUL: I should feel such a beast: ashamed for the rest of my life.

NICHOLAS: And proud if you prostituted yourself and me for a romantic scruple?

PAUL: It would hurt him so much, so much.

NICHOLAS: Do you think I love you?

PAUL: I never doubted it.

NICHOLAS: And do you love me? (*She merely laughs.*) Very well then; you must be strong.

PAUL: I can't, I can't.

NICHOLAS: Kiss me.

PAUL (*in terror*): No! Don't touch me: I should give way.

NICHOLAS: Would you? (*Overcoming her resistance, he kisses her.*) Say you will.

PAUL (*very low*): I will. (*He puts her hands to his lips reverently.*) Oh, darling, don't.

NICHOLAS: To-day? This morning?

PAUL: Can't I have a little time?

NICHOLAS: It will only be the harder.

MAGNUS *comes in.*

MAGNUS: Hallo, Lucy.

NICHOLAS: Good-morning.

MAGNUS: You're very late down this morning, young woman. Only just appeared?

PAUL: I overslept. Have the others gone?

MAGNUS: I've just been seeing them off. Where are the Messiters?

NICHOLAS: They left not long ago. And so must I.

PAUL (*quickly*): No, don't go!

NICHOLAS: I thought you wanted to speak to Mr. Magnus?

PAUL (*uneasily*): Yes; but there's no reason for you to leave us.

MAGNUS: What do you want to speak to me about?

PAUL: Oh, it's nothing important: at least it is rather.

MAGNUS: Well?

PAUL: It—it's simply that . . . It'll do some other time.

NICHOLAS (*significantly*): I can see I'm in the way.

PAUL: No. I'll say it now. (*She turns her face from them and waits a long time, unable to speak.*) D. C. dear, I want to ask you something.

MAGNUS: Yes?

Another long pause.

PAUL: Will you . . . I want you to take me away somewhere: to Sicily or—anywhere.

She dare not trust herself to look at either of them.

MAGNUS (*mildly surprised*): *Do* you indeed?

PAUL: I'd like to go as soon as possible. I'd . . .

And then she stops abruptly. She blows her nose and suddenly, without lifting her eyes from the ground, goes quickly out into the garden. MAGNUS *stares after her in astonishment.*

MAGNUS: Was she crying?

NICHOLAS (*complacently*): Yes.

MAGNUS: Do you know why?

NICHOLAS: Yes.

MAGNUS: Why?

NICHOLAS (*still very bland*): Miss Robinson is in love.

MAGNUS: Oh.

NICHOLAS: With me.

MAGNUS (*after a little*): Oh.

NICHOLAS: I asked her to marry me.

MAGNUS: And she said?

NICHOLAS: She said she would like to.

MAGNUS: You surprise me.

NICHOLAS: I infer from that that you dislike me?

MAGNUS: On the contrary, I don't even know you. Does anybody?

NICHOLAS: Perhaps not.

MAGNUS: Is she *going* to marry you?

NICHOLAS: That depends on you. Just now she was about to—er—announce our engagement, but her courage failed her.

MAGNUS: You mean her loyalty didn't fail her.

NICHOLAS: That is precisely what I mean. My impression is that her loyalty to you will *not* fail her. Everything therefore, as I say, depends on you.

MAGNUS: And what exactly do you expect me to do?

NICHOLAS: Frankly, nothing at all. I have not forgotten your principles. Professional egotist: wasn't that the phrase?

MAGNUS: Your memory is impeccable.

NICHOLAS: All the same the thought *did* just flit across the back of my mind that you might in this instance make an exception.

MAGNUS: My congratulations that so silly a thought only flitted.

NICHOLAS: Is it quite useless for me to press the point further?

MAGNUS: You haven't yet stated clearly what you want of me.

NICHOLAS: Putting it quite shortly, to offer Miss Robinson—how shall we say?—her release.

MAGNUS: I see. And can you seriously conceive me, my young friend, playing the rôle of Sidney Carton?

NICHOLAS: I'm sure you'd do it very nicely.

MAGNUS: I assure you the part is as much opposed to my temperament as to my principles.

NICHOLAS: Possibly I am the wrong advocate. Will you allow me to send Miss Robinson to you?

MAGNUS: No, I will not.

NICHOLAS *shrugs politely.*

NICHOLAS: In that case there remains—no more for me to say.

Ever so slightly he bows: then takes himself off through the garden. After a moment or two PAUL *appears.*

PAUL (*very subdued*): Mr. Lucy said you wanted to speak to me.

MAGNUS: The devil he did!

PAUL: Didn't you tell him to?

MAGNUS: Well, that wasn't exactly my message. (*She sits down, constrained, her eyes averted: while he moves about watching her closely.*) So you want to go to Sicily?

PAUL: I thought it would be nice.

MAGNUS: Why Sicily?

PAUL: Well, anywhere.

MAGNUS: Would anywhere be nice?

PAUL: I don't mean Margate or Monte Carlo, of course.

MAGNUS: I thought you liked it here?

PAUL: So I did. I suppose I'm tired of it.

MAGNUS: We might go somewhere warm, if you want to: say, in November.

PAUL (*more exclamatory than she intended*): No, now!

MAGNUS: Why now? Are you expecting the police?

PAUL: No, I don't know why I want to. Don't ask me a lot of questions; because I couldn't answer them myself. It's probably just a silly fit of nerves. I'm tired of everybody here: and of myself. I only know I want to get away somewhere: just we two. Travel, if you like. I've never been anywhere. Perhaps it's just that I'm not really a sociable animal. We're all right together, you and I. I like that. I'm at my worst in crowds.

MAGNUS: That's a bad trait.

PAUL: Never mind whether it's good or bad. Just let's go.

She hasn't looked at him once. He walks up and down for a while in silence, glancing at her slightly piteous figure occasionally. At length he takes a rather menacing stance in front of her. His expression is almost fierce.

MAGNUS (*sternly*): You're a disgusting little liar!

PAUL (*in astonishment*): D. C.!

MAGNUS: Why don't you tell the truth?

PAUL: What on earth are you talking about?

MAGNUS: You know quite well what I'm talking

about. I'm talking about your nasty affair with that scallywag of a parson.

PAUL (*controlling herself*): So he told you, did he?

MAGNUS: Yes, *he* told me, as you hadn't the courage to. Love, he called it: I think that was his euphemism.

PAUL (*her temper rising too*): And love it is. I meant to spare you, but now I'm not sorry. I didn't expect to be abused like a pickpocket.

MAGNUS: Perhaps you expected me to appreciate the joke? Meant to spare me! You should have thought of that earlier.

PAUL: Do you suppose we can control these things?

MAGNUS: I know tomcats can't control their passions.

PAUL (*in a fury*): God, D. C.!

Senseless with rage, she throws herself at him, but he catches her wrists.

MAGNUS: And I know tomcats can scratch. But you shan't scratch me. So that's why you heroically refused my offer of marriage, is it?

PAUL: Let go my wrists, you swine!

MAGNUS: Thank God, it was only a mistress who betrayed me and not a wife. That much is only according to the rules.

He lets her go contemptuously.

PAUL (*nearly inarticulate with rage*): Oh, if I could only betray you a thousand times a day!

MAGNUS: I don't doubt but that you've tried! Love! So you've found your kitchenmaid's dream at last, eh?

PAUL: Don't talk about love, you! You only understand adultery, prostitution.

MAGNUS: Very likely. Still I shan't ask for my money back. The settlement stands.

PAUL: Do you suppose I'll touch it?

MAGNUS: If Lucy lets you! Now be off. Ellen will help you to pack.

PAUL: I've nothing to pack. It all belongs to you. Besides, you may find it useful later.

Her whole frame shivering with temper, she goes to the door. Then suddenly she turns and looks at him. His back is towards her. Suddenly, unexpectedly, she bursts into peal upon peal of laughter: but the laughter is not far from tears. He stares at her in amazement.

MAGNUS (*at length*): What's the matter with *you?* (*She does not stop.*) Stop that, for God's sake!

PAUL (*with a touch of hysteria*): Dear D. C.! Dear D. C.!

MAGNUS: Now, what the devil?

PAUL (*between her laughter*): You're a rotten actor, D. C.

MAGNUS: Have you gone raving mad?

PAUL: A rotten actor, a rotten actor!

MAGNUS: I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about. Have you?

PAUL: You needn't keep it up any longer. I call your bluff. (*She goes to him gently with a smiling mouth but brimming eyes and takes his arm affectionately in her two hands.*) Fancy my being deceived for a moment! (*He throws off her hands roughly; but, unperturbed, she presses his arm to her again.*) Fancy my thinking that you genuinely meant all the harsh, vulgar, nightmare things you said! Forgive me, D. C.

MAGNUS (*less convincingly*): I meant every one of them.

PAUL: Baby, baby! Give in, D. C. dear. Confess.

He looks at her sullenly for a moment.

MAGNUS: I give in.

She squeezes his arm fondly. She presses her cheek silently against his shoulder.

PAUL (*quietly*): Why so elaborate, D. C.?

MAGNUS: I thought there might be some trouble in making you go otherwise. You're a good, loyal little beast.

PAUL: There would have been.

MAGNUS: Secondly, the prospect of a scene of sentimental renunciation filled me with horror. And also it occurred to me that if I behaved like a novelette husband, you might have no remorse when you *had* gone.

PAUL (*when she can speak*): You're just an angel; you're just an angel.

His eye is twinkling again now.

MAGNUS: If you say that again, I'll box your ears.

PAUL: Box them, dear.

MAGNUS: You really love your parson?

PAUL: Terribly, dear.

MAGNUS: How damn silly.

PAUL: I know. But it's heaven.

MAGNUS: Damn silly heaven.

PAUL: Heavenly silliness. I'm an ass, but I'm satisfied.

MAGNUS: And yet you wanted to go to Sicily with me?

PAUL : I thought I might forget him.

MAGNUS : You *are* an ass, aren't you ? Anyway it's all plain sailing now.

PAUL : Whoever would have thought that I of all people would marry a parson !

MAGNUS : I'll send him to you and you can give him the good news. And if he says " I told you so," kick him in the kidneys for me.

He makes to go, but she holds his arm still.

PAUL : No, don't go. I expect Nicholas has gone home.

MAGNUS : Without his hat ?

He nods towards it. It is on the bookcase. Gently he disentangles his arm from hers. She is reluctant. She wants to do something, but is not quite sure what. She lifts her head, is about to kiss him and changes her mind. Instead she lifts his hand and rubs it to and fro against her cheek. Then she kisses the knuckles softly : then the palm.

PAUL (*looking up at him very seriously*) : Angel.

He draws his fist back as though to strike her, but pinches her cheek fondly instead. Then he is off into the garden. Alone PAUL *stands for a while quite still where he left her. Then crossing to the mirror she brushes the hair from her forehead with both hands.* LUCY'S *hat catches her eye. She moves over to it and stands pensively tracing a pattern with one finger on its crown.* NICHOLAS *comes in. She faces him beaming.*

NICHOLAS : Mr. Magnus sent me.

PAUL : Did he tell you ?

NICHOLAS : He told me nothing. Is there anything to tell ?

PAUL : I mean about us. He's set me free.

NICHOLAS *smiles.*

NICHOLAS : Ah.

PAUL : Is that all you've got to say ?

NICHOLAS : Must I pretend to be surprised ?

PAUL (*happily*) : Tell me, where exactly are your kidneys ?

NICHOLAS : For the life of me I forget. Why ?

PAUL : Never mind. I'll let you off. (*She goes to him, her eyes radiant.*) Darling, isn't it wonderful ?

NICHOLAS : It's certainly very satisfactory. (*He passes her and picks up his hat.*) Well, I must go.

PAUL : Go ? Where are you going ?

NICHOLAS : I am leaving this parish to-day.

PAUL : Leaving it ? For good ?

NICHOLAS : Yes.

PAUL : What do you mean ? You never told me ? What are you leaving for ?

NICHOLAS : I have work to do elsewhere. (*She begins to grow afraid.*) Good-bye.

He makes his very slight bow.

PAUL : Nick ! What are you talking about ?

NICHOLAS : Haven't I made myself clear ?

PAUL : Don't you understand ? D. C.'s set me free. I can marry you. Didn't you understand ?

NICHOLAS : Perfectly.

PAUL : Then why did you say good-bye ?

Her breathing has become hard and uneven.

NICHOLAS (*blandly*) : Why ? Because I am going away.

PAUL: You mean—for a little while? You're—coming back?

NICHOLAS: No, I am not coming back.

There is a long silence.

PAUL (*her voice is strangely shrill*): But—but aren't you going to marry me?

NICHOLAS: Young lady, look at me. Do I look like a marrying man?

PAUL (*suffocating*): But you—you *asked* me to marry you.

NICHOLAS: Did I? Very likely. (*Then as if in explanation*) You see, I have my work to do.

PAUL: Work? I don't know what you're saying. What work?

NICHOLAS: God's work.

PAUL: Were you doing—God's work when you asked me to marry you?

His slight shrug again.

NICHOLAS: God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform.

PAUL (*wildly*): But there was no point! It was just—pointless, pointless cruelty!

NICHOLAS: In time to come, when you are cooler, you will see the point.

PAUL (*screaming*): Then you admit it! It was all humbug. All your love, all humbug.

NICHOLAS (*imperturbable*): All humbug.

PAUL: Oh, you're—you're . . . (*But a fit of violent sobbing interrupts her.*) You're wicked, wicked! Can't you see? You're the wickedest man in the world! You care for nothing at all except your God.

NICHOLAS: For nothing else at all. Is that wicked?

PAUL: For your wicked God! I see it all now. (*Hysterically*) You must be the Devil himself, do you hear! The Devil himself! You look like him! You wanted Dorothy to ruin that poor young author, you wanted Cosmo to steal a dead man's work, and me to betray D. C. and D. C. to imprison me, and Messiter to profit by a blasphemous hypocrisy.

NICHOLAS (*quite unemotionally, almost inhumanly*): Yes; and you all thought you could do it. I offered you all what you thought you wanted most in the world. But you found you had made a mistake. You found to your surprise and humiliation that you all wanted to serve God more. You set your poor, little silly-clever selves up against God and thought you could get away with it. I merely shewed you that you couldn't. That is my work.

PAUL (*still sobbing bitterly*): If there were a God, he wouldn't let you draw another breath.

NICHOLAS (*continuing smoothly*): When you are told that God is omnipotent, it merely means that in the long run he has you all on the end of a string. He may hold some on a longer, looser string than others, but the string is there, always there. It is a mistake to strain at it: it only hurts. That much I think I have been able to demonstrate. A circle of distinguished blackguards, Messiter said. Poor little blackguards! Mrs. Messiter's is the only wise head among you. That, you see, is the point, the whole point. Mrs. Messiter's is the only wise head among you.

PAUL (*breaking out again*): I say your God is a cruel, malicious God!

NICHOLAS: That is what people always say when they pull too hard against the string.

PAUL: Has he no pity, no compassion?

NICHOLAS: Certainly not. He is not a person. What vanity is it that tempts you to invest him with your own little human attributes?

PAUL (*banging her fists madly against the desk she has been crying on*): I tell you my heart is broken: broken, do you hear? Does that mean nothing to you?

NICHOLAS: Nothing: less than nothing. Every little tinpot philosopher has been able to see that fame and money are blind alleys; but it took a Plato to discover that so also is beauty; and a Jesus of Nazareth to point out that personal love is a mere wasteful, distracting nuisance.

PAUL (*crying wearily*): My heart is broken, my heart is broken!

NICHOLAS (*unmoved*): A broken heart. How grotesquely trivial! Think what I have given you instead; a vision of God, a vision of God. No less.

For a little while longer she cries. He takes no heed. Presently her tears grow less. At last she collects herself.

PAUL: Is that . . . I suppose, that's really all you have to say.

NICHOLAS: Isn't it a great deal?

She moves about the room, while her composure returns. In front of the mirror she halts.

PAUL (*very nearly achieving the normal tone of her voice*): My nose is all swollen with crying.

NICHOLAS: Your eyes are a little bit pink too.

PAUL: Yes, I think I'll go and bathe them in cold water.

NICHOLAS: Warm water is better.

PAUL : I suppose we shan't meet again.

NICHOLAS : Not if you're lucky.

PAUL : Good-bye.

And then—for she has the soul of a gentleman—she goes to him and offers her hand.

NICHOLAS (*taking it*) : Good-bye.

PAUL (*not too easily*) : I hope your—work prospers ?

NICHOLAS : Do you say that—in malice or in earnest ?

PAUL (*ever so slightly reluctant*) : I'm not quite sure. I believe—in earnest.

NICHOLAS : I'm glad.

PAUL : Good-bye.

NICHOLAS : Good-bye. (*Then as she goes out*) Remember, *warm* water.

This is the first time we have seen him alone. His face is utterly without expression. He takes up his hat, smooths away a dent in it, adjusts his ring to the right angle and is about to leave, when a figure appears in the garden doorway. It is LOUIS KISCH, *hatted and carrying a suit-case and an overcoat.*

NICHOLAS (*with polite surprise*) : Good morning, Mr. Kisch.

LOUIS : Good morning. Anybody about ?

He deposits his hat and chattels inside the door.

NICHOLAS : Mr. Magnus, I believe, is in the garden. Did you come down by car ? I understand that you were expected on Friday.

LOUIS : So I was. I suppose really I'm rather late. As a matter of fact I had some rather bad luck : missed one or two trains.

He begins to fill his pipe.

NICHOLAS: How provoking. To tell you the truth, I'm very glad you *have* come. There's something I rather want to speak to you about. Can you spare me a few minutes now?

LOUIS: I can. What is it?

NICHOLAS: Sit down.

LOUIS *sits.*

LOUIS (*as he lights his pipe*): Well?

NICHOLAS: Do you remember last week-end we played a silly game called Truths?

LOUIS: I do.

NICHOLAS: Do you remember also declaring yourself that your one desire in life was to create beauty?

LOUIS: I do.

NICHOLAS: I have been thinking about that; and frankly the idea *has* just flitted across the back of my mind that . . . Now how exactly shall I put it?

But before he can put it any way the Curtain has hidden them both from sight.

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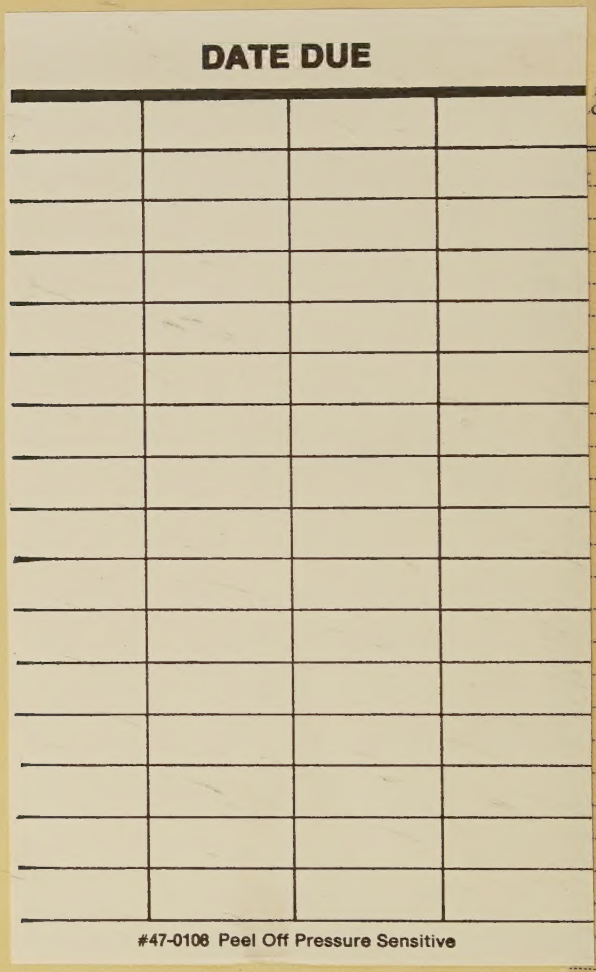
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